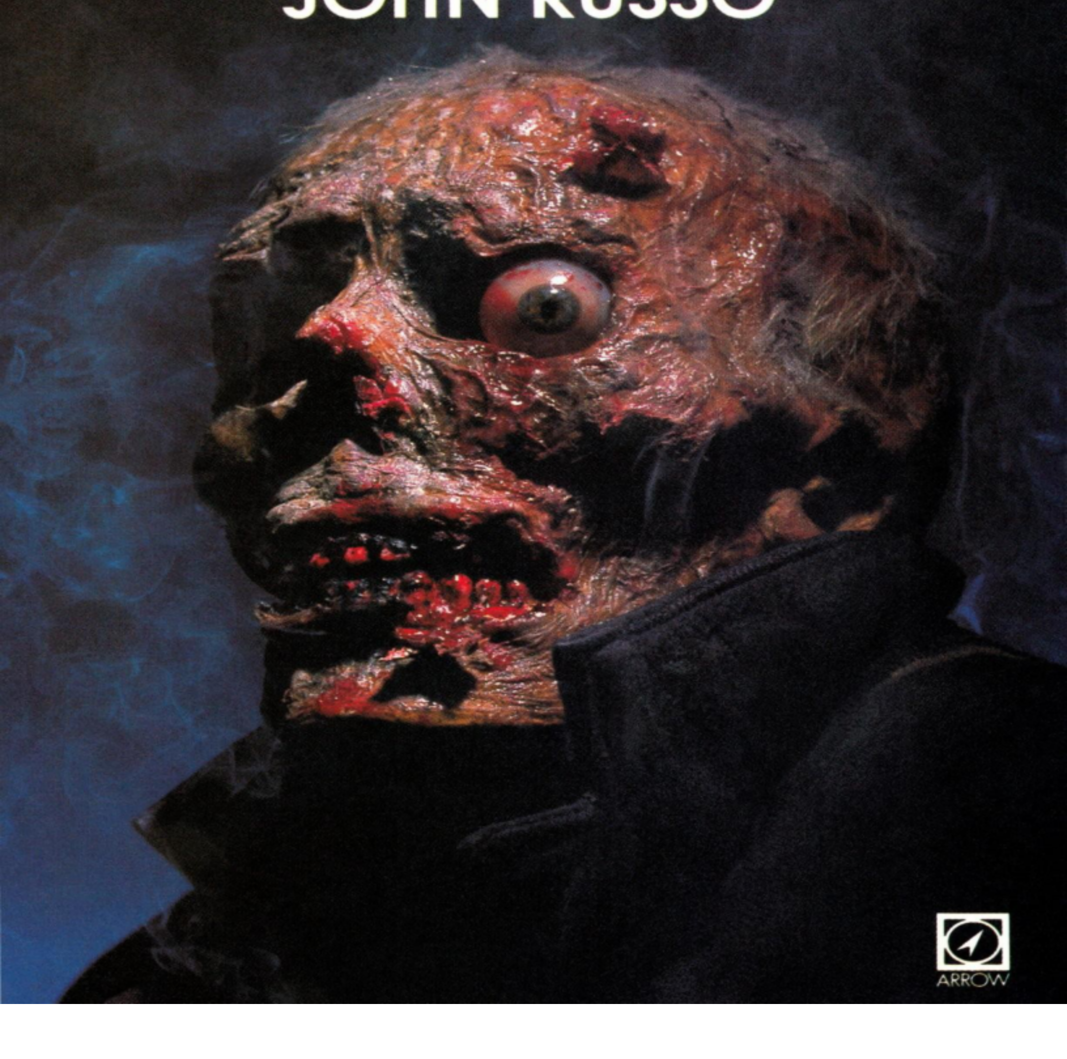
NOW A MAJOR FILM

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

JOHN RUSSO



Freddy Travis had just found his first full-time job, at the vast, gloomy Uneeda Medical Supply warehouse.

What he didn't expect were the racks of human skeletons … the pickled brains … the freezer compartments full of fresh corpses.

But nobody else there realized the true horror concealed in a secret store of huge metal drums.

Now one of them was accidentally opened.

Then what it contained would spread through the warehouse, and drift across the cemetery next-door …

To arouse the twitching, shambling, screaming nightmare of the waking dead—desperate to feast on the brains of the living.

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

Suddenly something moved in the shadows, behind some rusty drums. Tina stiffened. “Hello?” she called out tremulously. “Are you there? I’m here to help you.”

Something started to shuffle out of the shadows. Tina squinted, trying to make it out, then she gasped—a huge intake of air that filled her entire chest cavity—and her eyes got huge and round as saucers.

Rooted by fright, she found herself staring at a horrible monstrosity. The body that was in the cracked drum had somehow reconstituted, into a black, tarry, loathesome skeleton. It spoke in a voice like vomit—the true voice of the creature, undisguised by its former attempt to sound mortal. “Brains … brains,” it said in a lustful croak, shuffling towards Tina, raising its arms to clutch and embrace her.

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John Russo



ARROW BOOKS



Arrow Books Limited
17–21 Conway Street, London W1P 6JD

An imprint of the Hutchinson Publishing Group
London Melbourne Sydney Auckland
Johannesburg and agencies throughout the world
First published 1985



Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Anchor Brendon Limited, Tiptree, Essex
ISBN 0 09 942610 2

NOTE TO READERS

This novel is based on the film
of the same name, and is markedly
different from the earlier novel
of the same title by John Russo,
which was originally published
by Hamlyn Paperbacks.

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

1

Freddy Travis was sitting on the john thinking, hoping that his boss wouldn't come hunting for him in the men's room, and fearing if his boss did barge in on him the lack of stink would give away the fact that he didn't really have to take a crap.

At age twenty-two, Freddy was having a helluva time adjusting to his first for-real full-time job. Like, being a nine-to-fiver was incredibly tough to handle—especially without doing a little speed or popping a couple of perks or something. Man, he told himself, maybe you're tryin' to get too straight too fast—like goin' cold turkey—it can really screw up your system.

But he was determined to hang in as long as he could take it. Too much more of the street scene and he'd be dead. Up till a few weeks ago he had been under the illusion that he was on a glide rather than a nose-dive, cruisin' along not givin' a shit, spoutin' off the motto he had copped from an old black-and-white gangster flick: *Live fast, die young, and make a good-lookin' corpse.* But now he was scared shitless of dying young. His mind was all bent out of shape from when he and his girlfriend Tina had found their pal Sunshine naked on his bathroom floor, all bloated and green and stinking of gangrene, the broken syringe and needle still sticking in his arm.

Seeing Sunshine like that had not quite turned Freddy into a Born Again Straight, but it had been the first step in his conversion. He was trying damned hard to get his act together, but sometimes his doubts about himself were enough to give him the shakes. If he didn't have Tina pulling for him, he wouldn't have a prayer.

He figured that by now the rest of the gang would know he was working as a shipping clerk at the Uneeda Medical Supply warehouse. Tina would have had to come clean because otherwise everybody'd just keep bugging her about why her old man had been totally splitsville the last couple of days. It was okay for Chuck to know—he was a fairly straight dude, almost as unspacy as Tina. Casey would take it in her stride, too; outside of being sort of a nymphomaniac, her head was on her shoulders pretty much of the time. But, Meat and Scuz and Legs—they'd flip out. To them, any kind of *job* was really rad. They were punkers through and through, as hard core as Freddy had been till Sunshine's O.D. had opened his eyes.

He stood up, buckled his jeans, and came out of the stall, glancing around nervously, still expecting his boss to pop in on him. When it

didn't happen, he decided to fudge a few more minutes. One of the things that had him so damned shaky was that right after lunch, four hours ago, he had been given the job of packing up a human brain preserved in formaldehyde, which had been ordered by a medical college in Duluth. It was a miracle that he had managed not to toss his cookies right then and there. Stomach acid still popped up into his throat every time he remembered what the brain looked like. He tried not to think about it, but he couldn't get the grisly image out of his head. Head! Even the word *head* made him think about the brain floating in a bottle.

When he applied for this job, he had pictured himself packing up wheelchairs and stethoscopes—nice, sedate, *helpful* stuff. No way had he imagined that he'd have to handle human organs and body parts preserved in formaldehyde. If he had had a glimmer of such madness, he sure as hell would've stayed away from Uneeda Medical Supply.

After washing his hands, he took off his red baseball cap and looked at himself in the mirror. He barely recognized the straight dude that stared back at him, clean-shaven, with his short-cropped brown hair neatly parted and combed. Except for the little gold ring in his right ear and the cartoon drawing of a turd on his yellow tee shirt with the caption I GOT MY SHIT TOGETHER, he could have damn near passed for an Ivy Leaguer from the mid-sixties. Up till last week, his hair had been in corn-rows and pigtails and his face had been painted in zany designs of orange and purple and chartreuse, but he'd sacrificed his need for individual artistic expression in order to become a cog in the wheel of commerce.

Freddy was thankful that his first week in the big, gloomy warehouse would be a short one. Fourth of July fell on a Wednesday this year, so it'd make for a nice long weekend. Starting off on a two-day week was the main reason Freddy had believed he might be able to endure the suffering of easing himself into a routine. But unfortunately his boss had sounded him on sticking around for some overtime, and he was scared to say no. Deep down, he understood that he absolutely *mustn't* blow this job. He *had* to prove himself to himself. Otherwise he might end up like his pal Sunshine.

In a sudden seizure of panic that he might have been goofing off too long, he barged out of the men's room and almost smacked his boss, Frank Nello, in the face with the door. But Nello jumped back with remarkable agility, considering he was forty-five years old and about the same number of pounds overweight. "Christ! What ya tryin' to do, kid, kill me?" he complained good-naturedly. "I was worried about ya. I came to see if maybe you fell in."

"Constipated," Freddy mumbled.

“That’s *my* problem. Want some Exlax? I keep a supply in the office at all times.”

“No, thanks. It was a hard one, but I finally forced it out,” Freddy lied.

“Well, it’s past quittin’ time. While you were on the throne, everybody went home except you and me and the warehouse foreman, Burt Wilson. He’s makin’ his rounds, checkin’ security.” Frank clapped Freddy on the shoulder. “I don’t mind tellin’ you, I liked the way you hauled ass today, kid. I had my doubts about you because of that ring in your ear. My advice is get rid of it if you wanta look more mature. Last kid we hired with one of those turned out to be a friggin’ doper. We didn’t need to fire him. He quit when he found out that the kind of medical supplies we ship outta here don’t include drugs.” He peered at Freddy sharply to see if mention of the word “drugs” might cause the kid to drool at the mouth.

But Freddy kept a poker face. He had already pegged Frank Nello as a sort of Italian Archie Bunker—a portly, balding clown with a red, bulbous nose—likeable in spite of his prejudice against anyone under thirty who didn’t aspire to owning a fat mortgage on a ticky-tacky house in the suburbs with aluminium siding, a one-car garage, a set of rusty swings and see-saws in the backyard for the 2.3 kids. His nose might’ve turned that way from drinking too much whisky and beer, but that was A-okay to him because he didn’t consider alcohol a “drug”.

“You gotta learn the warehouse, kid,” Frank lectured. “We were too busy today for me to try and teach you the ropes good and proper. That’s why I asked you to hang in after quittin’ time. Now that the shit has stopped hittin’ the fan around here, we can hear ourselves think a little bit. Believe me, if you want to get ahead you gotta know the layout like the back of your hand.”

Frank waved his arm at the aisles and tiers of green steel shelving in the big, dusty, barn-like building, as if he were a monarch gesturing grandiosely at the splendours of his domain. It was clear that he identified completely with his work here, and took great pride in it. His clean grey workclothes were crisply starched and pressed, and there was a red-and-white UNEEDA MEDICAL SUPPLY patch on his breast pocket. Putting his arm around Freddy in a fatherly way, he said, “Lemme give you another piece of friendly advice, kid—no offence, now, okay?”

“Sure,” Freddy said, trying hard to feel just a trace of the warmth that his boss obviously felt for the warehouse. But to him it felt like a big, cluttered jail or, worse, a morgue. The few narrow windows in the place were so grimy they almost didn’t exist, but merely blended into

the walls of corrugated steel reaching up to a corrugated steel roof and a tangle of steel girders. The naked light bulbs dangling down from the girders had halos around them caused by the dust. In the lack of sunlight and fresh air, Freddy could almost feel himself turning a ghastly, sickly colour, like his pal Sunshine. He had to force himself to pay attention to Frank Nello.

"Get yourself a nice work uniform like I got. Show Burt Wilson you got the proper attitude, you wanta get ahead. That shitty tee shirt you're wearin' might be all right for a gag or a Halloween party or somethin', but in regular everyday life a lot of people might be offended by a picture of a turd, even if it's done in jest."

"I'll get rid of it," Freddy promised, trying not to let despair show in his voice as he felt his sense of individuality being squeezed out of him. He thought that not wearing the tee shirt any more might be like ditching a good-luck charm. He needed the reminder: I GOT MY SHIT TOGETHER. Otherwise he might start believing he really didn't.

"You can keep the baseball cap," Frank said. "People can get by with baseball caps. But the ring in the ear and the tee shirt you can do without."

"Gotcha," Freddy murmured.

Just then a grey steel door across the aisle from the men's room popped open, and Burt Wilson came up from the basement. He was a big, freckled, red-headed man with thick-lensed, black-framed glasses, dressed in the same kind of grey workclothes as Frank Nello, including the UNEEDA MEDICAL SUPPLY patch on the breast pocket. The uniform wasn't company issue, so somebody was copying, and Freddy guessed that Frank must be patterning himself after Burt in order to score brownie points.

"Hey, Frank! It's quitting time!" the warehouse foreman boomed. "Go home! Enjoy your holiday!" He jingled a set of keys on a fat ring. "Everything's shipshape. Tight as a drum."

"I'm gonna stick around for a while," Frank Nello said to Burt Wilson. "Got some orders to fill. The kid's gonna stay here with me and pick up some juicy overtime. I want him to learn the ropes real fast so he can take up more of the slack."

"Okay, but lock up the office and turn on the alarm when you leave, will you? And remember you and the family are invited to my place tomorrow for my annual Fourth of July barbecue."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Frank beamed.

"You're invited, too, kid," Burt said to Freddy. "Think you can make it?"

"Gee, thanks, but … but I already promised to go to my girlfriend's place," Freddy lied. "Her folks are expecting us."

“Okay … well, maybe next year,” Burt said. He smiled good-heartedly. “I think you’re still gonna be with us come next year. Frank had a lot of good things to say about you at lunchtime.”

“Well … thanks,” Freddy stammered.

Burt Wilson left, and Frank and Freddy were alone in the huge warehouse. Freddy felt dismal, almost scared. He worried a little over whether Burt’s security check was valid. How could anyone really be sure that some freak wasn’t hiding somewhere around here? The place was a vast maze of potential hiding places. The stark overhead lighting cast a tangle of black shadows among the tall shelves and aisles of various-sized crates and boxes. Anybody or anything could be lurking. Walk down any of these aisles alone and a rabid rat or a raving hatchet murderer might jump out at you. Freddy made up his mind to try to stick close to Frank, if possible, while they were working alone tonight.

“First, let’s grab a cup of coffee to get our brains stimulated,” Frank said.

They went to where the coffee machine was, in the cluttered office that Frank shared with Burt Wilson, where each man had his own grey steel desk surrounded by tall black filing cabinets piled high with company forms and logbooks. Freddy and Frank sipped black coffee in plastic cups as Frank riffled through a stack of purchase orders on a clipboard and Freddy peered over his shoulder trying to look intensely interested.

“Okay, Freddy,” said Frank. “We got an order here for two skeletons for the St. Louis University School of Medicine. See the specs here?”

“Yeah,” said Freddy, reading over Frank’s shoulder. “They want two adult female skeletons.”

“With *perfect teeth,”* Frank emphasized, tapping the order form with his index finger. “That’s an AF-1. You could look it up in the logbook, but I don’t have to ’cause I know it off by heart.”

“I have to learn everything by heart?” Freddy asked, failing to hide his dismay.

“It’ll come easy to a smart kid like you,” Frank soothed. “You’ll see. Mark my words. By the time you fill a couple of hundred orders, you won’t need to rely on the logbook too much except for special items nobody wants but once in a coon’s age.” He rubbed his hands together with enthusiasm. “C’mon, let’s get started. Done with your coffee?”

“Uh-huh,” Freddy said, gulping it down.

Picking up the clipboard, Frank led the way. “Two adult females with perfect teeth,” he repeated, exuberant in his knowledge of exactly where to find them. “As I said, that’s an AF-1. So we go to the ‘A’ section, which is divided into ‘M’ and ‘F’—” he stopped, facing

Freddy, hands on his hips, clipboard under his right arm. “Now what do you suppose ‘M’ and ‘F’ stand for?”

“Male and female,” Freddy responded.

“You got it. Bright kid! C’mon.” He led the way into the “A” section, where dozens of human skeletons were hanging from steel poles by means of wire hooks attached to their heads. The skeletons were wrapped in transparent plastic bags. They gave Freddy the creeps. Trying not to think of what they really were, he tried to pretend they were suits in garment bags hanging up on a rack at a dry-cleaning establishment. He wondered if Sunshine was reduced to a skeleton yet. He guessed not. It would take longer than a few weeks. Probably the flesh was still mouldering from the bones, eaten by worms. Freddy shuddered and tried to push the thought out of his mind.

“There’s one with perfect teeth,” Frank said cheerfully. “Take it down from the rack.”

Freddy trembled.

“Got a chill, kid?” Frank said. “I’m a bit chilly myself. We can turn the air conditioning down. No need for it to be up so high now that there aren’t a bunch of guys in here puttin’ out body heat.”

Steeling himself, Freddy lifted the surprisingly light human skeleton, holding it by its head.

“Right here. Right here’s the packing crate,” Frank instructed. “See? We just put a bed of excelsior in here …”

Unnerved by staring face-to-face into the skeleton’s eye sockets, Freddy was grateful of the opportunity to lower it into the packing crate, which reminded him of a coffin.

“Now we put some more excelsior all around,” Frank said.

Freddy helped him, anxious to get the bones covered up.

“You’re perspiring, kid,” Frank said. “First you got the chills, then the sweats. You think you might be comin’ down with the flu? Maybe you oughta stay home tomorrow, even if it *is* the Fourth …”

“No, I’m okay,” Freddy protested, feeling better now that pink excelsior was covering the skeleton. He helped Frank put a lid on the crate. Then, as Frank made a notation on the purchase order, Freddy asked, “Where in the world do they get all these skeletons?”

“I asked Burt Wilson that question once. I don’t know if he was teasin’ me or not, but he claims they come from India. An international treaty, he told me. All skeletons come from India.”

“Is that right? How come?”

“I swear I don’t have the slightest idea. But sometimes I wonder how they get all these skeletons with perfect teeth. How many people you know die with perfect teeth? Gotta have a few cavities, right?”

Frank chuckled. “I think they must have a skeleton farm somewhere over in India.”

“Overpopulation,” Freddy said. “Disease. Starvation. A lot of Hindus die young. They don’t live long enough to even get tooth decay.”

“You a philosopher, kid?” Frank asked. “You’re spoutin’ off some pretty deep stuff.” He eyed Freddy piercingly, as if he had given evidence of being a communist; then he pivoted and said, “Come on. I want to show you some stuff you didn’t get to see the last couple of days ’cause it was so damn hectic around here.”

Freddy followed with trepidation, hoping he wouldn’t have to look at any more skeletons.

Frank said, “You already know where the prosthetic limbs are, right? And the wheelchairs, gurneys, and beds for invalids? And the oxygen—that’s where we keep it. Watch out for that oxygen. It’s explosive. Don’t smoke around it.”

“Mr. Wilson told me not to smoke anywhere in the warehouse,” Freddy said.

“That’s right, but sometimes a guy might weaken and sneak one. I noticed you got cigarettes in your jacket when you hung it up this morning. All I’m sayin’ is if you *are* ever gonna sneak one, don’t do it around this oxygen section, or you might blow us all to kingdom come.”

“I’m not going to smoke on the job at all,” Freddy promised, and he was scared enough of the thought of blowing himself up that his promise was sincere, even though he was dying to get some nicotine in his lungs.

“Now, correct me if I’m wrong,” said Frank, “but I don’t believe you ever had to fill an order for a split dog.”

“Split dog?” Freddy said perplexedly.

“That’s what I said,” Frank chuckled. “Split dog. Here’s one.” He pointed at a shelf where a black-and-white mongrel stood mounted on a stand.

At first Freddy didn’t notice anything unusual about the animal, other than the fact that it was dead and mounted, like a taxidermist’s trophy. But then Frank pulled it out and spun it around, and it was truly a “split dog”—an embalmed half of a dog split down the middle so that all its organs could be viewed in cross-section.

“Yipe!” Freddy gulped.

“I admit it’s grotesque, but you’ll get used to it,” said Frank. “The split dogs are for veterinary schools. This is the only one we have on hand right now. We get an awful lot of orders for split dogs, so you’ll be handling them day in, day out.”

"Turn it back around," Freddy said. "If I have to handle them, I'll never turn one around. I'll pretend the other side is whole."

"Don't be squeamish, kid, it don't pay off around here," Frank advised. "You think split dogs are bad, what about humans? We keep dead humans around here, too."

"How c-come Burt Wilson didn't tell me?" Freddy stammered. "He … he n-never mentioned anything like that when he interviewed me for the job."

"I guess he figured you already knew, or at least could guess. After all, this is a medical supply firm. Everybody knows doctors practice on dead bodies. C'mon, I have to show you where we keep them."

Wondering how he could make his feet go when he was half paralyzed with fright, Freddy tagged along with Frank Nello. He tried to bolster his nerve by telling himself that he probably wasn't going to see any *decomposed* bodies. He wasn't going to see anybody that looked like Sunshine, all bloated and green. Doctors liked fresh corpses to practice on. Corpses that were well preserved.

Frank walked Freddy over to a big freezer door, then opened the door and went in. Freddy stood frozen in the doorway. "C'mon, kid!" Frank bellowed. "I don't wanta linger in here and catch a cold … I wanta show you what's here and get out. Don't be scared to come in—somebody who's already dead is *safe.* Only live people can hurt ya."

Freddy made himself enter the dreaded freezer.

Frank explained, "This is where we keep the fresh cadavers. We sell them to medical schools and to other places … sometimes to the U.S. army for ballistics tests and whatever. Right now there's only one cadaver on hand. We're low on inventory … but we got a shipment comin' in on Monday."

Freddy's eyes bulged as Frank slid a large steel drawer part of the way out, revealing a dead young man about Freddy's age, all wrapped up in plastic. There were no marks on the body … no indication as to cause of death. His imagination prodded by fear, Freddy wondered if maybe there was a corpse farm somewhere, like the skeleton farm in India, where healthy people were made to die in untellable ways so that a continuous flow of cadavers could be ensured for medical schools … and for ballistics tests for the U.S. army.

"Let's get out of here before we catch pneumonia and wind up like this poor stiff," Frank said, slamming the steel drawer shut.

Freddy gladly backed out of the cold-storage locker, trying not to hurry as much as he wanted to, so his boss wouldn't laugh at him for being scared. "How many bodies are there in here, usually?" he asked in what he hoped was a conversational tone.

"Well, we try not to overstock. It's like the restaurant business—you

don't want your inventory to lose its freshness." Chortling at his own joke, Frank clapped Freddy on the back. "Come on back and help me nail the lid on that skeleton, and I'll show you how to fill out the shipping forms."

The door to the cold-storage locker had been standing open. Frank closed it, much to Freddy's relief, but it promptly came open again. "How come you don't lock it?" Freddy ventured. "I see a hasp and padlock there, but it wasn't on when we came, even though Mr. Wilson checked security."

"We don't usually like to use the lock," said Frank. "Too much trouble to always be fussing with the combination. Most of us don't come in here unless we have to, and there's certainly nothing in here a thief would want to bring home. But you gotta always remember to close this door good, or else it pops open."

He slammed the door hard, stared at it, and it stayed shut.

"Let's lock it," Freddy suggested.

"Naw, it'll stay now. I got the right touch."

But Freddy remained doubtful as they walked back towards the skeleton they had to finish getting ready for shipment. Now that he knew he was in the presence of a corpse that might not stay locked up, he was truly anxious to get away from the warehouse. In a meek voice, so as not to piss Frank off, he asked, "How late do you think we'll work? The only reason I ask is I have a date for eight o'clock."

Frank glanced at his wristwatch. "Maybe we'll keep at it another hour or so and then knock off. What's the matter—you don't like makin' time and a half? I thought I was doin' you a favour. Young kid tryin' to get a start in life …"

"Oh, I *really* appreciate it, Frank, honest I do, but …"

Frank smirked knowingly. "Got somethin' hot waitin' for ya, huh?"

"My girlfriend … Tina … Vitali."

"Last name's Vitali?" Frank said. "Nice clean *Italian* girl? I'm sorry, kid, I didn't mean—"

"That's okay, Frank."

"I forgot you mentioned a steady girlfriend. I better watch my mouth from here on out. I don't usually like to talk that way about a nice *clean* girl …"

"I understand," said Freddy, hoping Frank's sense of propriety and embarrassment would lead him to atone by letting him get off work in a short while.

2

To the beat of loud punk music coming from Scuz's ghetto blaster—a gigantic metallic radio/tape-player carried like a suitcase on his shoulder—Tina Vitali and the rest of the gang bopped along the sidewalk in a sleazy, run-down section of Louisville. Tina wasn't saying much. Instead she was thinking what to her were deep thoughts.

Like her boyfriend Freddy Travis, Tina had been forced into some heavy soul-searching by the trauma of finding Sunshine dead from a heroin overdose. Nowadays she found herself constantly re-evaluating herself and her world, instead of having pure unadulterated fun all the time like she used to. Sometimes when she and Freddy were making love—an act that was supposed to lead to the creation of *life*—she would find herself thinking of how terribly brief life could actually be, and wondering if the pain and fear of death were a fair price to pay for a short flurry of joyful existence. Once such thoughts pried their way into her mind, she couldn't banish them very easily. And while she was thinking them, she could not have an orgasm. After faking a few times, she had finally levelled with Freddy about her hang-up. He had been touchingly understanding and sympathetic, and this had made her fall more deeply in love with him. But her ability to love was tainted by her torment over whether it was truly worthwhile to love someone for a brief interlude on the way to the grave.

If she had the nerve to tell these things to anyone in the gang other than Freddy, forget it! They'd say, Hey, you're a groovy chick with everything going for you, so play it cool and stop freaking yourself out. She knew that she was good-looking, with her long black hair, prominent cheekbones, full lips, and big firm breasts, but she wasn't vain about her physical attributes. She feared that at twenty she was already an old lady, aged prematurely, not outwardly but deep inside. In a way, she envied her shallower but happier friends—Meat, Chuck, Scuz, Casey and Legs—who had stayed quirky, carefree and innocent because they had not breathed the aura of Sunshine's death.

They were a motley, unlikely looking group of comrades, moving to their own beat through the neighbourhood of slum-lord tenements, boarded-up store fronts, and weedy lots full of tumble-down bricks and broken glass. Meat was the only one who was not Caucasian; his skin was almost as black as a piano key, and he had a reggae haircut with long plaited dreadlocks; his shirt and trousers were shiny black,

too, and so were his platform shoes. Chuck was straight, middle-class-white-looking, very square, with a sandy crew cut and a sprinkle of freckles; in his tan, cuffed chinos and striped short-sleeved shirt, he was like a refugee from the Ivy League of the fifties; and he came off that way on purpose as a kind of campy personal statement about God knows what. Scuz was tall and skinny in a green jumpsuit, with a matching green Mohawk haircut. Legs, his weird, sexy girlfriend, had her short, butchered-up hair dyed blue; she wore a blue sleeveless tee shirt stretched tight enough to show her protruding nipples, blue short-shorts, blue plastic boots, and blue leg-warmers. Casey was almost as straight-looking as Chuck; blonde, brash, and bouncy, with a sensationally voluptuous body, she was wearing tight purple slacks, white sneakers, and a tight white turtleneck. Chuck had a crush on Casey; he had confided this to Tina and no one else; he was too shy to mention it to the object of his affection, who knew anyway, and was stringing him along. Casey sometimes slept with Meat, which tore Chuck apart, although he tried to be cool enough not to show it.

"Hey, are we gonna party tonight, or what?" Casey said to everybody, but mostly to Meat.

"Yeah, we're gonna party, babe," Meat drawled.

"Well, where? Where we gonna party?"

"Huh?" said Scuz, turning down the volume on his ghetto blaster.

"Where we gonna party tonight?" Casey yelled.

Meat picked up half a brick and lobbed it through the broken window of a defunct supermarket, shattering some more of the glass. "I don't know," he said lazily. "Somewhere. Somewhere over the rainbow—that's where we're gonna party."

"We could go to the park," Casey suggested.

"The cops said they'll shoot us if we go back in the park," Chuck reminded.

Scuz snickered, showing his broken front teeth, his Mohawk haircut blowing in the faint July breeze. "We could take the cops up on it," he said. "That would be a real death trip."

Tina trembled inwardly.

"I like death," said Legs.

"I like death with sex," said Meat. "How 'bout you, Casey? Do you like sex and death?"

"Meat, fuck off and die," Casey said without malice.

Tina thought to herself: they wouldn't dare talk like this if they had seen Sunshine the way me and Freddy saw him. Unless all their loud, brazen talk is their way of proving they can still be brave, after death has come so close. But it came *closer* to me. That's why I'm scared to

even talk about it and why it plagues my thoughts all the time.

"Casey, will you have sex with me?" Chuck asked, working up his nerve to actually say it, but in a kidding way.

"Go choke a chicken, Chuck," Casey said.

"We could go to the Rat Club!" Legs piped up shrilly and gleefully.

"Naw," Scuz squelched, "they closed it down. And you gotta be twenty-one to get into Head Cheese."

"I'm old enough," said Meat. "So is Casey."

"Yeah, but you're the only ones," said Tina, not really in the mood for going to a disco.

"So how 'bout it, Tina?" Meat asked her. "Where can we party tonight?"

Tina suddenly decided she'd rather be alone with Freddy instead of with a whole gang of people. "Hey, you guys," she said, "a party would be really rad, but I'm supposed to go meet Freddy when he gets off work."

"Yeah?" said Casey. "Where you supposed to meet him?"

"At this medical supply warehouse where he's working."

"He got a *job?"* Scuz sneered. "What a queeb!"

"Don't knock it, Scuz," Casey advised. "He gets a payday, he'll buy us all some dope. Why don't we all go pick Freddy up? I was wondering where he disappeared to. Let's show him we aren't down on him just 'cause he got a job."

"Hey, you guys," Tina interjected, trying not to sound frantic, "I'm sure it would be really rad for all of us to bop over there, but after all Freddy's bound to be pretty tired."

To Tina's relief, Meat backed her up, saying, "Yeah, you're right. Anyway, we ain't got no car."

But Casey wasn't so willing to let the issue drop. "How are *you* getting there?" she said to Tina.

"On the bus. The stinking, crowded, and sweaty bus."

"Shit, I ain't takin' no fuckin' bus," Scuz bitched, "It costs an arm and a leg."

"Yeah, all of fifty cents," Chuck jibed. But no one gave him a laugh.

"Suicide has a car!" Legs shrieked, as if she had found buried treasure.

"Oh, God, not him," sighed Casey.

"Why not?" Scuz challenged.

"Yeah, a car is a car," Legs agreed half angrily.

At this point, Tina blew her cool. "Hey, you guys!" she shouted. "This is just me and Freddy!"

“Since when?” Casey jeered. “Let’s all go get Suicide and make him drive us over to where Freddy’s working. I wanta see this freaking medical supply warehouse—maybe it’s full of embalmed cadavers or something!”

3

Freddy Travis and Frank Nello were in the warehouse office. Freddy was pacing and fidgeting, despite his wish not to appear overly anxious to knock off work. Frank was sitting behind his desk, poring over his clipboard full of purchase orders. Outside, there was a rumble of thunder.

Frank said, "Shit! Sounds like rain. Gonna spoil the boss's barbecue tomorrow. Unless it lets up by morning."

"Frank?" Freddy said.

"What?"

"What's the weirdest thing you ever saw in here?"

Frank put down his clipboard and leaned back contemplatively, his hands behind his head. "Well, kid, I've seen weird things come and I've seen weird things go, but I've seen just one weird thing that has to cap them all."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?" Freddy asked. But all of a sudden he wasn't so sure he really wanted to know. Maybe it was the thunder, and the memory of the corpse locked in the cooler, but he couldn't stop the chills from creeping up and down his spine.

"Lemme ask *you* a question," said Frank. "You ever see any of them movies about corpses comin' back from the dead?"

"And … and eating p-people," Freddy stammered. "S-sure … I've seen movies like that. But they're just *movies."* He tried to sound brave, but he didn't quite convince himself. As shaken as he had been by seeing Sunshine dead, he'd have shit in his boots if Sunshine had sat up and come after him.

Frank said, "According to a story I read in one of these here magazines like *National Enquirer,* the basic idea for some of those kinds of movies came from a true incident."

"Naw, go on," Freddy countered with a show of bravado. "You gotta be kiddin' me."

"No," Frank said soberly. "What's more, I got reason to believe in what I'm tellin' you."

"It's not possible for the dead to come back to life … except maybe on Judgement Day," Freddy hedged, suddenly making up his mind to go to church more often. "I mean … those movies … some of them were *ridiculous.* They showed the zombies taking over the whole world."

“Well, naturally the movie-makers changed some of the details in order to protect themselves and act like they didn’t know anything for real. What *actually* happened was that back about 1970 there was a chemical spill somewhere in the Pittsburgh area. The stuff leaked into a morgue and a cemetery and made the dead bodies jump around and act like they were alive.”

“What chemical?” Freddy blurted. “Stop trying to scare me, Frank!”

“It’s called 2,4,5 Trioxin. They were going to use it on marijuana or something. Darrow Chemical developed it in the first place for the U.S. army. They shut it down after the business with the corpses. But the story sort of leaked … and inspired some of those zombie movies —which had *some* of their facts straight, and some ass backwards.”

“So what really happened?” Freddy asked. He couldn’t help asking. He was both intrigued and revolted by the discussion, and he still wanted to believe that Frank was merely pulling his leg.

But Frank sounded so deadly serious. “Well, they shut it all down, and the army took away the contaminated dirt and the bodies, and they managed to pretty well keep it a secret from the public.”

“So how come *you* know about it?” Freddy pounced.

Frank leaned forward, glowering. “Don’t call me a *liar,* kid! I *know* what I’m talkin’ about! You see, the army transportation depot got their orders crossed, and they brought the bodies here, along with some other cadavers in transit from one post to another for some of them ballistics tests I told you about. Later, some colonel called up here having a real fit, and told us to just let the shipment sit until further notice. It’s been here ever since. We never heard from the colonel again—prob’ly got killed in Vietnam or somethin’. It’d been his ass if we’d have told on him, but we was scared and didn’t know who to tell. Typical army fuck-up; they put a bunch of corpses here and forgot about ’em.”

“Why don’t you sell them back to the army for ballistics tests?” Freddy asked, being jokingly clever.

“Because they’re contaminated with God knows what,” said Frank. “Nothing we can do with them. Even if we—”

The phone rang. Freddy jumped. Frank chuckled at the kid’s nervousness as he picked up the receiver. It turned out to be his wife Alice, nagging him about having a pot roast in the oven and when was he coming home. He didn’t get mad. She was a good wife and a fine mother to their two kids. It was just that, it being a holiday tomorrow, she had thought he could leave at the regular quitting time, like the other guys.

“Sorry, honey,” he told her. “You know I told you about the new fellow I’m breakin’ in? Freddy Travis? Well, he’s a good, hard

worker." Frank grinned at Freddy. "He and I are only gonna be working here about another hour. Got one or two important items we want to wrap up."

Freddy liked the sound of only being here another hour. Heartened, he waited while Frank bullshitted with his wife a bit longer, then hung up, telling her that he loved her and he would see her soon.

"Want to see them?" Frank said, looking up at Freddy.

"See them?"

"The corpses."

"W-what do you mean?"

Frank grinned, taking delight in Freddy's squeamishness. "They're down in the basement," he said. "Come on.

He got up and hustled out of the office, and Freddy followed hesitantly after him, wondering why he didn't stay put, and telling himself it was because he didn't want to be accused of lacking any balls. So he was going to descend into a basement full of contaminated corpses.

Frank unlocked the steel door across the aisle from the men's room, where Burt Wilson had come up from the basement earlier after his security check. Peering from behind Frank, Freddy saw nothing but a black hole. "Watch the third step," Frank said, "It's a bastard." He hit a light switch, and a bare bulb glowed dusty yellow, casting black shadows down the staircase.

Needing to hear the sound of human voices as a bolster against his fear, Freddy asked, "You mean they just brought a bunch of bodies here and left them?"

"You know the army," said Frank, starting to descend.

"And they've been here all this time?"

"About fourteen years if I recall."

Cripes! Freddy wondered what he was going to see. After being dead for fourteen years, what would the cadavers look like? How badly would they stink? Would the flesh be totally rotted from the bones? And might it be better if they were reduced to skeletons by now, so they couldn't come back to life any more?

"You comin', kid?" Frank barked impatiently. "Like I said, watch out for that third step."

Freddy made himself follow his boss, who was already halfway down before Freddy made a move. At the bottom, Frank turned on another light. "There they are!" he said with a kind of glee, since he was showing off evidence that what he had told the kid up in the office was literally true.

Over in a corner of the vast, filthy, musty-smelling basement stood

half a dozen huge metal drums. Freddy stepped over a puddle of rusty-looking water to follow Frank for a closer look. Stencilled on the sides of the drums, in chipped and corroded white letters, was the following information:

PROPERTY: DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
IN CASE OF EMERGENCY CALL
1(800)454-8000

Despite his staunchest effort to seem nonchalant, Freddy stared at the dusty, rusty, corroded drums with a growing sense of foreboding. His heart skipped a beat as he thought about the rusty-looking puddle he had stepped over a few seconds ago. He picked his feet up and tried to see if any moisture had seeped into his sneakers.

"You didn't believe me, kid—here's your proof!" Frank crowed.

"There's bodies in there?" Freddy asked meekly.

"Yeah, I'll show ya."

"Never mind, I believe you."

"Good thing these caps are plastic," said Frank. "Otherwise, with all this corrosion, they'd be stuck tight to the drums. Whoever designed them musta figured that out."

"Why would they want the caps so easily removed?" Freddy asked fearfully, stepping back a few paces. His heel went into the rusty puddle as Frank tugged and twisted and succeeded in wrenching a filthy brown plastic cap off one of the metal drums.

"Because there's a kind of porthole here," said Frank, "so the contents can be viewed and inspected. C'mere and look … wait'll I wipe it off."

"Shit!" said Freddy. "I stepped in that puddle!" With disgust he shook his foot hard, over and over, as if he could shake out the water that had seeped into his shoe.

"So? A little water ain't gonna hurt ya," said Frank, as he wiped the dirty, greasy porthole with an equally dirty balled-up rag that had been lying on top of one of the other drums.

Freddy figured he'd take a quick glimpse through the porthole and that would be that. He forced himself to step forward. Frank stopped wiping, and they both looked. "All I see is sort—of a round black lump," Freddy said with a measure of relief. "It could be *anything* in there."

"I *told* ya, it's a friggin' corpse!" Frank said indignantly. "We're lookin' at the top of its head. The chemicals made it turn black like that. We can get a better look if I tip the drum towards the light."

“Never mind.”

“I don’t like to be called no friggin’ liar. Help me tip this sucker. It’s heavy.”

Reluctantly, Freddy got hold of the drum. He stared at his fingers and saw that just touching the corroded metal had coated them with a rusty, greasy film.

“I got a block of wood here,” said Frank. “We’ll tip the sucker towards that bright light bulb overhead there … then hold it steady and I’ll kick the wood block under it to keep it in a leaning position. Then we’ll have us a good look at what’s inside.”

Freddy eyed some of the rust stains running down the sides of the drum. “These things don’t leak, do they?” he asked, desperate for reassurance, although it was perfectly obvious that the drums weren’t sealed very well.

“Well, I guess after fourteen years they can’t be *totally* leak-proof,” said Frank. “They were made by the Army Corps of Engineers. Those guys know what they’re doin’. I’m sure they did the best job that could be done at the time.”

“I don’t know …” Freddy said doubtfully. His fingers felt slimy and even stung a little from touching the drum.

“I thought you were anxious to cut out of here and go see your girlfriend,” Frank teased. “Let’s stop bullshittin’ and have a peek inside here. Then we can knock off.”

They crouched and started to push. When they got the drum tipped about six inches off the concrete floor, Frank tried to use his workshoe to kick the block of wood in place. Right at that instant, Freddy’s fingers slipped, and the drum rocked backwards in a sideways spin. “Damn!” Frank yelled. He tried to compensate, and that only made matters worse. The bottom edge of the drum slid on some greasy corrosion that had been underneath it, and the shove Frank had applied in an effort to steady it helped make it fall. With a resounding metallic thud it hit the concrete.

Frank and Freddy managed to jump clear.

The drum rolled and smacked against two of the other ones. Then, with a loud *crack!,* a welded seam split open, and a cloud of yellowish vapour squirted out under pressure.

Frank and Freddy staggered back, coughing and choking. They both fell to the floor, clutching their throats, losing consciousness …

The yellow vapour continued to squirt out of the fallen drum with the cracked seam. The black, mummy-like corpse inside began to slowly dissolve … boiling away to a black, tarry liquid … as oxygen replaced the noxious yellow fumes that were gradually escaping. As

the gas in the drum lost some of its pressure, it no longer spurted so violently. Instead, it fumed up out of the crack in the weld, rising up and rolling along the basement ceiling … between the beams … and towards the suction of a draft in the stairwell earlier descended by Frank and Freddy.

The two men lay flat on their backs, oblivious to the gas that continued to waft over and around them on its pathway to the stairwell.

The smoky yellow gas floated up the basement steps and crept out on to the main floor of the warehouse. After rising through the open steel door, it then hugged the floor, retaining an eerie, unnatural cohesiveness … as if, in a mystical sense, it felt itself to be the spirit of the corpse dissolving in the drum.

Like the aura of death personified, the noxious gas rolled towards the cold-storage locker, where the door that was not padlocked, the door that Frank had slammed, suddenly *clicked* open. The yellowish gas crawled in, around the side and the bottom edge of the freezer door, and up the interior wall … into the drawer-like compartment where the cadaver was lying.

The vapour that had spewed into Frank and Freddy's lungs now curled and hovered around the cadaver. Wisps of the fumes entered the cadaver's nostrils and floated between its lips, while the main part of the yellowish aura hugged the cadaver's naked torso, limbs and head.

And, in a little while, the cadaver started to twitch as the yellow gas caressed and enveloped it.

4

At a dacha on the outskirts of Moscow, two Englishmen and an American were drinking vodka after a sumptuous summer cook-out with their attractive Russian wives. The two Englishmen were Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, who in their high-ranking posts with the British diplomatic service had fed secret information to the Soviets for twenty years before their cover was blown and they had to escape from England.

The American was Raymond Aston, who as a Soviet “agent in place” had so cleverly deceived his superiors within the CIA that he rose to a position of trust and influence, enabling him to subvert and undermine U.S. intelligence efforts. Over a twelve-year career, during which time he was secretly in the employ of the KGB, he arranged for the arrest and execution of dozens of American agents operating undercover in Communist Bloc nations, and carried out his devastating mission so skilfully that he was never suspected as a traitor.

In 1970 Raymond Aston was the CIA’s chief liaison officer with the U.S. army in Operation Drummer Boy, the “roll up” of the Darrow Chemical crisis near Pittsburgh. It was Aston who, with his intimate knowledge of cryptograph codes, succeeded in diverting twenty-four of the steel drums containing “deactivated corpses” from their intended destination—the CIA forensic laboratory at Langley—to the Uneeda Medical Supply warehouse in Louisville.

When the diversion was discovered by Aston’s military liaison, Colonel Peter Hoffman, Aston killed Hoffman, then fled from the United States to Canada, and from Canada to Russia, where he was welcomed as a hero and was awarded the Red Banner Order “for outstanding patriotic services over many years”.

Raymond Aston, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean were well rewarded for their contributions to the Communist cause. They each were guaranteed sizeable pensions for life, in addition to the fat salaries they received as consultants to the KGB. Their fringe benefits included chauffeur-driven limousines and other special privileges normally reserved for commissars, such as access to fine wine, meat, clothing, household goods, and other capitalist luxuries. They lived like nobility on their rent-free dachas, while the vast majority of Soviet citizens had to wait for years to be assigned a modest one-room apartment.

However, they occasionally felt twinges of nostalgia for the homelands they had betrayed, and they attempted to eradicate these maudlin sentiments by drinking too much vodka and by rehashing their past exploits in the world of international espionage.

While their wives were in the house cleaning up after the picnic meal, the men talked and drank at the table on the patio.

“Well, tomorrow will be a big day for your former compatriots back in the States,” Guy Burgess said to Raymond Aston.

“Why?” asked Aston, pretending not to know.

“July Fourth!” Burgess boomed, “Independence Day! The day you threw off the chains binding you to our jolly King George the Third!”

“Whose jolly King George?” said Donald Maclean with a slurred tongue. “Not *mine.* Not yours either, old chap.”

“Not any more,” Burgess agreed. He was a fleshy, florid man with a wide, fish-like mouth and a shock of thick, purely white hair. Snide and arrogant, he seemed the type that most people would instinctively distrust, which was perhaps why they had bent over backwards to trust him too far.

Maclean, by contrast, was the picture of civility slanting towards timidness, when he wasn’t drunk. Short, thin and balding, with a small mouth and weak chin, it didn’t seem possible he could be self-assertive much less destructive, and this demeanour had helped him get away with quite a lot. “How long now since you … er … defected?” he said to Raymond Aston.

“Fourteen years,” said Aston. “Fourteen years since Operation Drummer Boy.” He took a hearty sip from his tumbler full of Russian vodka, much stronger than any American brand. He was drinking it neat, in the Russian manner, instead of diluting it with ice. A closet alcoholic before defecting, his alcoholism was pretty much out in the open now, especially when he was with his friends. Even so, he had a more commanding presence than they, and managed to look more youthful despite the fact that, like them, he was in his late fifties. His light-brown hair did not easily show its streaks of grey; his pale blue eyes retained an alert, analytical gleam; and his body was still lean and hard thanks to a daily regimen of jogging and calisthenics that kept at bay the deteriorating effects of his alcohol addiction.

“Seems to me it’s about time for the drumbeat to start rolling again,” Guy Burgess joked, referring to Operation Drummer Boy.

“Unless they’ve rolled it up tight since then,” said Maclean. “After all, they’ve had fourteen years to do it in. What do you think, Raymond?”

Aston said, “Comrade Zotov and I had a discussion about that very topic just last week.”

Burgess and Maclean perked up. Gregori Zotov was the First Director of the KGB division to which all three defectors had been assigned in Moscow. It was unusual these days, removed from "heavy action" as they were, for any of them to have a private audience with the First Director, so the other two men at the picnic table were keenly interested as to whether Aston could, or would, say more about what he and Zotov had discussed.

"I should think," Burgess prodded, "that fourteen years'd be enough time for the CIA or the U.S. army to locate the twenty-four missing drums."

"Yes, our former … er … associates should be quite up to such a task," Maclean chuckled, "even with them being as incompetent as *we* know them to be."

Burgess laughed.

But Aston didn't. "Comrade Zotov and I believe otherwise," he squelched, with underlying anger in his voice and a piercingly cold glint in his pale blue eyes.

The other two men understood why he was reacting so vehemently. He was the only one of the three whose final mission as a bona fide spy might still be playing itself out, and might, even at this late date, have devastating repercussions upon the enemy. The rest of the work that the defectors were concerned with these days was dull, timid and boring. And the insulting, demeaning part—the part that drove them all to drink too much—was that they sensed that their fellow Soviets' didn't truly trust them. They had harmless, undemanding and uninspiring desk jobs, as if their superiors suspected that they might switch their loyalties back to their homelands if they were trusted with something vital.

The vodka and his longing for a renewed sense of self-importance caused Raymond Aston's tongue to loosen in an attempt to impress his companions. He told them, "Comrade Zotov confided to me that according to our intelligence sources, the twenty-four steel drums are still stored exactly where I misdirected them. Neither the CIA nor the U.S. army has tracked them down in all this time. I told Zotov that this doesn't surprise me at all. I myself reprogrammed the computer and scrambled the cryptographic codes after the shipment was on its way. I might have got away with it and remained an agent in place, if Colonel Hoffman hadn't stuck his nose in where it didn't belong. Even still, if I would've had time to make his death look like an accident …"

"You were better off defecting," said Burgess, running his fingers through his white hair. "We all were. Time was running out on us. We'd have eventually been caught."

"We live *well* here," said Maclean, trying to convince himself as

much as the others. “Exceptionally well. Where else would we have such lovely wives, twenty years younger than ourselves, and without their pretty little heads screwed up by the Women’s Liberation Movement and other decadent capitalist nonsense?”

“I’ll drink to that!” said Aston, and they all had a toast and a laugh.

“I still don’t see,” Burgess mused, “how Zotov could be so sure that the drums haven’t been discovered. The CIA probably located them and got rid of them by now … safely decontaminated. They wouldn’t want us to know, of course, so they probably planted a bit of disinformation, and Zotov is falling for it.”

“Do you honestly believe the First Director is that stupid?” Aston sneered. “I can disabuse you of *that* notion. Six months ago, KGB agents in America surreptitiously entered the warehouse of the medical supply company in Louisville. They inspected the drums and their contents. The corpses are still inside. But the drums are old, corroded, and ready to crack.”

“It will happen again!” Maclean crowed, clapping Aston on the shoulder in drunken glee.

“Yes,” Burgess said. “If what you say is true …”

“It *is,”* Aston smirked. “It’s only a matter of time, and the terror will be loosed upon our enemies once again.”

5

Tina Vitali hated riding in Suicide's ancient beat-up convertible, which stunk of cat shit, even with the top down. Suicide and his mother lived in a claustrophobic slum apartment where they kept twenty-three cats, at latest count, although the number was constantly increasing due to the birth rate and the adoption of additional strays. Suicide blamed it on his mother. "She just *loves* cats. Can't turn them away," he said, as if that explained it all quite logically. He never admitted that her fixation might be considered neurotic, even psychotic, probably because if she had to be committed to an insane asylum, nobody would be around to cook and clean up for him. But if it was all his mother's fault, why did he allow the cats to ride en masse in his car? Sometimes he'd be cruising along with a dozen or so of the furry creatures for company, pissing, shitting, screwing and meowing all over the upholstery. "Discourages the narks from shaking me down," was the only explanation Tina had ever heard from Suicide, who was an addict and pusher.

Tina wished her friends would've just let her go to see Freddy all by herself. Then she immediately felt guilty for not wanting them around. But more and more they seemed weird to her, and immature. They wouldn't have forced themselves on her, she thought, if they had sufficient couth. She would've travelled to the Uneeda warehouse in a nice clean bus. But here she was, crammed into the back seat of a stinky convertible with Scuz, Legs and Chuck; Suicide, Meat and Casey were in front.

Nobody could ask for a weirder, crazier driver than Suicide, who weaved all over the road. The way he looked, no cop would even bother giving him a traffic citation, even for a minor offence—they'd just gun him down on sight. His skull had been shaved and then allowed to grow for about a week, till it was covered with a uniform growth of stubble about an eighth of an inch long. He looked like a lumpy coconut with a flattened nose and black, rotten teeth, and he was wearing a studded dog collar around his scrawny neck.

She glanced up at the heavily clouded sky as lightning flashed and presumably thunder rolled—but she couldn't hear it since Scuz's ghetto blaster was going full volume in his lap. She hoped desperately that the impending rain would hold off while they were in the car because the awful smell would suffocate them if they had to put the top up.

To try to numb her olfactory nerves, she took a healthy swig of some cheap, sweet wine when Scuz handed her the bottle. Suicide had traded somebody for a case of the wine, which had been swiped from a party or a bar mitzvah, in return for a vial of angel dust. So here they were, busting along in a convertible that was going to fall apart at any second in the middle of the street. And when the cops came to investigate the "accident" they'd find seven punkers stoned on rotgut wine that they had been passing around and guzzling while they were driving. They'd probably get sentenced to hard labour or a firing squad or something.

"Where we goin' anyway?" Suicide yelled.

Scuz turned the volume down slightly on his ghetto blaster.

"To party!" Casey shouted.

"To pick up Freddy," Tina interjected. She didn't want this caper to get any further out of hand. She was still clinging to the notion that she and Freddy might be able to sneak off somewhere to be alone.

"Oh, yeah?" said Suicide. "What the fuck is Freddy up to these days anyway?"

"He got himself a job," said Tina, leaning forward to yell the information into Suicide's ear.

"No shit? What job?"

"He's a shipping clerk."

"Yeah? That sounds like a shitty job."

Tina got mad. "Well, it isn't the president of the United States or keeper of a cat farm, but he makes good bread."

"Yeah?" said Suicide. "Maybe he'll buy some dope from me 'stead of bummin' it."

Tina almost told Suicide that Freddy was getting himself together and wouldn't be needing any dope any more, but she decided she had better keep her mouth shut. If the gang knew that she and Freddy were trying to stay straight, then the gang would pressure them both all the more to get stoned.

"Hey, listen," said Suicide. "How come you guys only come over when you need me to drive you some place?"

Meat said, "Because you're too spooky, Suicide."

Suicide laughed gleefully, taking it as a compliment. "You think *I'm* spooky," he yelled, "what the fuck do you think *you* are?" He turned to the back seat to include Tina, Scuz, Legs and Chuck in his comment, and when he did so the car careened into the oncoming lane and Meat had to yank the wheel hard to avoid a collision with a bread truck.

"Whew! Just try to get us to the warehouse alive, will you?" Meat

said when the tyres stopped squealing.

"Are you criticizing my driving?" Suicide shot back.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am," Meat told him.

Just to show who was boss, Suicide abruptly swerved the car over to the curb and screeched to a halt in front of the Uneeda Medical Supply building, almost catapulting his passengers into the windscreen or over it. They shrieked and groaned and cussed at him, accusing him of trying to kill them. "Eat shit! Eat shit!" he yelled at them.

"We might as well, we've been *smelling* it in this ratty, or rather *catty,* car of yours," Tina jeered. "I'm getting out." Without waiting for anyone to open any doors, she stepped over the side of the convertible and down to the sidewalk, her red plastic miniskirt riding up, giving everyone a shot of her long, shapely legs and slim, curvy hips.

The rest of the gang piled out of the car and they all stood around taking turns swigging wine and staring at the big corrugated steel warehouse with its sign lit up by spotlights and a field of oil storage tanks way out behind it. A high chain-link fence surrounded the huge gravel lot and loading docks on one side of the black rectangular building.

"Man, what a hideous, ugly place," Meat drawled. His coal-black eyes actually glowed, he got such a kick out of pure, unadulterated revulsion.

"I like it," Legs purred. "It's a statement."

Scuz put his arm around Legs and turned up the volume of his ghetto blaster.

"Well, let's go get the prick," Suicide said. "What do we do? Go up and ring a bell or somethin'?"

Tina put out an arm to hold Suicide back. "No," she said. "I better not bring all of you inside. It might freak out his boss."

"Freak him out? Us?" Suicide snickered.

"Is he some kind of weirdo?" Scuz said indignantly.

"His name is Frank Nello," Tina said. "An old-fashioned wop like my father. Freddy had to get a haircut to even get hired here. Now if we show up looking the way we do … I just don't want to blow it for him, that's all."

"Man, is Freddy turnin' into a *queeb?"* Suicide snarled.

"Cool it," said Meat. "Tina is right. We oughtn't to barge in. What time does Freddy get off?"

"Eight o'clock," said Tina.

"Haircut!" Suicide cursed. "Like, *nobody* tells me how to cut *my* hair!"

“Yeah, that’s why you look like a coconut,” Legs jibed.

Suicide glowered at her briefly but kept his mouth shut. He took a lot from her because secretly he had the hots for her and was hoping to shoot Scuz out of the saddle.

Chuck had stayed out of the argument all this time as he was looking all around, scouting his surroundings. He had noticed that across the street from the medical supply warehouse was an old cemetery surrounded by a high stone wall. The sign above the arched gate said, RESURRECTION CEMETERY. “Hey, gang!” Chuck said, pointing at the sign. “We could wait for Freddy over there!”

Not too many of Chuck’s suggestions were ever heeded. But he felt that this time he ought to score. The idea of goofing off in a graveyard was just the sort of thing to appeal to the zany group, including Chuck’s heart-throb, Casey. He was tickled when she squealed, “Great! Really rad!”

“I dig it,” said Meat. “We can lay on the grass between the tombstones and maybe do up a few joints till our man gets off work.”

“All right, let’s check this bone orchard out,” said Suicide, grinning and showing his rotten teeth. “But first I got to get somethin’ outta the car.” He unlocked the trunk and dug his hands into a wooden box.

“What’s in there?” Chuck asked, coming over to look.

“Road flares.”

“What are you gonna do with them?” Scuz wanted to know.

“This is really rad!” said Legs. “I’ve always wanted to, you know … *defile* one.” She pointed at the cemetery.

“I don’t want to do anything sacrilegious,” Tina protested, her Catholic upbringing making her timid. Also, her memories of how ghastly Sunshine had looked in death were so *vivid*. She could almost picture him, or corpses who looked like him, becoming angry at her and other grave defilers and coming back from the dead to seek vengeance.

“C’mon, babe, dead folks can’t hurt you,” said Meat, putting his arm around Tina. “I kinda dig graveyards. They’re free of malice, you know … real peaceful. The dead folks ain’t schemin’ and dreamin’ and connivin’ any more. They ain’t gonna rip us off—we ain’t got nothin’ they need.”

Tina had to admit there was a certain folksy wisdom in what Meat had to say, but she still felt pretty leery as she and the rest of the gang traipsed under the wide stone arch of Resurrection Cemetery. She wished Scuz would’ve had the decency to turn down the volume of the New Wave music on his box, but it was still blasting. He and Legs were both undulating their hips in a sexy, jerky dance as they

approached the looming tombstones. It was truly an old, *old* cemetery. In fact, it was overcrowded, even if none of the guests were complaining. The gravestones and monuments seemed to be piled shoulder to shoulder, jostling each other for elbow room. Interspersed were numerous above-ground crypts, like little stone houses, some relatively plain and some utterly ornate.

“This place is a stroke!” Suicide giggled, gesturing madly with a fistful of road flares.

Scuz cranked the volume on his ghetto blaster up even higher, and the New Wave beat pounded out over the graveyard, echoing from the monuments.

Legs started laughing and screaming like a banshee as she skipped and cavorted on top of somebody’s grave, dancing and dodging around a huge headstone carved into the shape of a crucifix.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. Tina nervously stole a peek at her Mickey Mouse watch with the red plastic band that matched her miniskirt. Although it was only seven o’clock, the sky was already fairly dark due to the approaching storm. Still another hour to go before Freddy was supposed to meet Tina. She wished that the rain would pour down right now in buckets. If it did, then she’d have an excuse to run out of the cemetery without the gang teasing her any more and calling her a chicken.

She just wanted to be with Freddy. It didn’t seem to be too much to ask. He was the only one who understood her. She loved him and missed him and wanted to be in his arms without anybody else around to spoil it.

6

Regaining consciousness, Freddy Travis felt like his head had been banged by two bricks coming together like cymbals in a strong man's arms. He groaned and blinked his eyes, watching a kaleidoscope of loud, painful colours dancing and metamorphosizing into a dusty yellow light bulb dangling over his head. When it dawned on him where he was he panicked, rolling over quickly despite the pain, ready to run from the corpse in the drum.

But the steel drum was still lying on its side where it had fallen, and there was no corpse. Freddy moaned and muttered to himself. "Silly … silly to be scared … I fell and hit my head … I'll be okay … that damned gas is gone now …" He staggered a couple of steps and threw up with an uncontrollable rush, vomiting into the rusty puddle of corrosion on the concrete floor.

Frank Nello woke up too, groaning and holding his stomach, and vomited on the floor a few feet away from Freddy. Grabbing a roll of paper towels from a grimy shelf, he tore off a couple of squares and wiped his mouth, then handed the roll to Freddy. "Kid? Are you okay?" Frank said. His voice was hoarse, and his complexion looked sickly green.

"I … I don't know," Freddy croaked. "My head hurts … and my throat. Christ, what a stink."

"That putrid gas sprayed us in the face," Frank said. "We're lucky to be alive. Thank God!" He made the sign of the cross.

Drawn by a compulsion to look at what had harmed them, Frank and Freddy went over to the fallen drum, bent over, and looked in. The glass porthole was broken—smashed away. In the bottom of the drum was nothing except some traces of black liquid.

"What happened to the … the body?" Freddy said in a hoarse whisper.

"It must've just dissolved when the air hit it," Frank speculated.

"Let's get outta here," said Freddy. "Christ, I never smelled anything like that in my life. I feel like I'm gonna be sick for a month."

"You look awful, kid," said Frank. "I guess I do, too."

"Let's go up to the men's room and rinse our mouths out and wash our faces. Shit! That stink is even on our clothes!"

"Wait a minute," Frank cautioned. "We don't want Burt Wilson to find this mess we made. He'll think we're stupid or somethin'. We

gotta get the cellar cleaned up."

Forcing themselves to work even though they both felt as achy, stiff and nauseated as if they were coming down with a super case of the flu, they squeegied the floor, pushing the rusty water and vomit towards the drain. Then they mopped up, using a wringer-bucket filled with a solution of water and industrial solvent. When they were done, Frank said, "Now comes the worst part—we gotta get that drum upright again."

"I ain't touchin' it," Freddy blurted.

"C'mon, kid, it ain't dangerous no more. If we don't cover our tracks down here, the boss'll know we done somethin' wrong."

With extreme reluctance, Freddy helped Frank stand the drum up, push it back where it had been originally, and put the plastic cap on. Then he grabbed some paper towels and wiped his hands.

"Now nobody'll ever know the difference," Frank said. "I guess if nobody but us ever bothered with these drums in fourteen years, they ain't gonna bother with 'em now."

"Now can we get outta here?" said Freddy.

Aching all over, they slowly ascended the basement stairs. Walking through the main floor of the warehouse, Frank spotted the door of the cold-storage room standing slightly ajar. He tried to slam it shut, but his arm was stiff and he didn't slam it hard enough the first time. He had to slam it again, grimacing at the pain the exertion brought to his muscles. "Christ, my joints are achin' like I have arthritis," he said. "Are yours?"

"Yeah," said Freddy. "We need a hot, steaming shower."

There weren't any showers in the men's room, but at least they could wash their hands and faces and rinse out their mouths, gargling into the sinks. Towelling off, Frank said, "I guess I feel a little better, but not much. I'm still sick as a dog."

They came out of the men's room, and Freddy sniffed the air very cautiously. "I can still smell that foul gas. It must be clogging my nasal passages. Either that or it's all over everything."

Frank said, "Maybe before we cut out I better spray some deodorant around here." He went back into the men's room and came out with a giant can of Lysol. He started to walk around, spraying it everywhere. Feeling dizzy, Freddy leaned against the men's room door.

Suddenly, from back among the tiers of warehouse shelves, came a loud *yipe* followed by a *crash!*

Frank spun around and Freddy jumped, even though their bones hurt when they moved so abruptly.

"What was that?" Frank said.

"Sounded like a dog," said Freddy.

"Dog? How'd a goddamn dog get in here?" Frank started to move in the direction of the sounds.

Freddy said, "Stop. Listen."

Both men stopped in their tracks. They cocked their ears. The yiping had stopped, but now they heard a faint panting. Stealthily, they advanced, down through a semi-darkened aisle of packed equipment. As they turned a corner, they came upon a big black-and-white mongrel, lying on its side on the floor, breathing heavily.

"How'd the damn mutt get in here?" Frank said, angry and confused. "Burt musta screwed up on his security check."

"Poor thing, what's wrong with it?" said Freddy.

They went to the dog and crouched over it, sensing something very strange about the way the animal was lying there … so utterly collapsed that it looked like a shell of itself … a bas-relief. "Careful, it might have rabies," Frank said. But Freddy started to turn the dog over. It yiped and snapped at him, and he screamed and jumped back soon as he saw what it really was … a *split dog!* … a veterinary specimen that had somehow come back to life and had come off its mounting stand, with a bar of the stainless-steel stand still sticking through its half of a body and wedged between the slats of a packing crate in such a way that the dog couldn't get completely free.

"Oh my God! Oh my God!" Frank yelled.

The dog shrieked with its one lung and writhed in agony on the mounting bar.

Aghast, Freddy backed away, flattening himself against a tier of steel shelving. "What are we gonna do, Frank?" he pleaded fearfully.

Frank summoned his courage, mumbling and making another sign of the cross over himself. "We've got to kill it. Put it out of its misery." He looked around for a killing device, and seized upon a broom. "I'll use this as a club," he said, unscrewing the handle from the brush. He started beating at the split dog, trying to smack its head, but it just shrieked louder and wriggled around like crazy.

Freddy couldn't stand it. "Stop!" he yelled, and grabbed Frank's arm.

"Lemme go! We gotta finish the animal off!" Frank shouted. "If I wasn't so achy and weak—"

Suddenly there was a shatteringly loud *crash* from another part of the warehouse, followed by a *howl* of agony.

Frank and Freddy spun around, leaving the split dog writhing on the floor.

The howling and screaming continued, accompanied by wall-

shaking bangs. In the huge corrugated steel building, all loud noises were exaggerated, taking on an extra dimension of urgency and alarm. Frank and Freddy hustled towards the terrible sounds. When Freddy realized where they were coming from, he stopped and tried to hang back, grabbing Frank by the sleeve. “No! Stop, Frank! The cold-storage locker!” Freddy pointed. The heavy locker door was actually shaking from the screaming and the pounding … and naturally it had come ajar—but whatever was inside hadn’t come out yet. *Why?*

Suddenly Frank realized the answer. “The cadaver in the drawer!” he yelled. “It can’t get out! It musta come to life like the dog and it’s tryin’ to crawl outta the drawer!”

“Run!” Freddy screamed, pulling Frank by the arms.

But Frank wouldn’t go. “No! Gotta lock the freezer!” Pulling himself free of Freddy’s grasp, he dashed to the locker door and snapped the big padlock on to the hasp. Then he backed away, trembling, muttering, “Oh, Jesus … Oh, Jesus …”

“We’re fucked, Frank. We’re fucked,” Freddy lamented. “What are we gonna do?”

“We’ve gotta think! *Think!”* Frank ran his thick fingers through his thinning hair. “C’mon, let’s get to the office. Gotta get away from all this screaming and pounding.”

The screaming and pounding of the cadaver in the cold room and the whining of the split dog were muffled by a few decibels when Frank shut the door of the office. Frank slumped behind his desk looking dazed. Freddy sagged into Burt Wilson’s big swivel chair, not giving a shit about asking permission, whereas before his recent sickening and frightening experiences he would’ve been too timid to impinge on the warehouse foreman’s domain. From outside, making itself heard above the screaming, whining and pounding, came a resounding rumble of thunder.

Freddy stammered, “Are—are w-we going crazy?”

Frank looked up, his eyes red and swollen, his face pallid. “No, it’s that shit from the tank! The goddamn chemical got all over everything and it’s bringing all the dead things back to life!”

“I don’t believe it!”

“Look, kid, I know it sounds preposterous, but we seen it with our own eyes.”

“We’ve gotta call the police, Frank!”

“No! We *can’t* call the police! Do you know what that’d do to the company and to my job? I’d get *canned* … Worse, I’d lose my *pension,* for Chrissakes!”

“Frank, this is no time to worry about your friggin’ pension. We’re

into some deep shit here. Who knows what that chemical is gonna do to us? We've been contaminated for God's sake."

"I ain't callin' no friggin' cops!"

"Then what about that telephone number on the side of the drums? Where it said to call in case of emergency."

"If we call that we get the army. Do you want the army comin' after us? If we *are* contaminated they won't screw around with us. They'll probably put *us* in a steel drum and store us in the basement with the other poor saps."

Freddy moaned and shook his head, cradling it in his hands. "I can't stand it, Frank. What are we gonna do? It's hopeless … hopeless …"

"I'll have to phone the boss, much as I hate to," Frank finally said. He picked up the receiver and dialled.

Freddy started talking in a rambling, stream-of-conscious way, mostly to himself. "My pal Sunshine … when me and Tina saw him there all cold and green and bloated … I'd have done anything to make it so it never happened to him … to have him back with us laughing and smiling and even shooting up if he wanted to a little bit … as long as he didn't do too much or get hit with any bad smack. I actually *prayed* that I'd wake up the next morning … or the morning after … and Sunshine … he wouldn't be dead. But I wouldn't want him coming back like that awful split dog … or that dead guy in the cold room. In a way, Sunshine is lucky to be gone … in heaven maybe … and to not have to go through the pain of dying ever again …"

The phone must've rung for a long time at Burt Wilson's house after Frank dialled. Freddy looked over at him and saw he was still waiting with the receiver to his ear, his head hanging down. Finally he must've got an answer, because Freddy heard him say into the mouthpiece, "Burt? This is Frank. Hey, I really hate to spoil your Fourth of July holiday … but I'm afraid we have got one hell of a problem on our hands …"

7

Fourteen years ago, when Horace Grover was first assigned to Operation Drummer Boy, he was a first lieutenant. Now he was a full-bird colonel. And he still had not tracked down the twenty-four steel drums containing corpses from the Darrow Chemical disaster, which had been diverted by the traitor and defector Raymond Aston.

At about the time that Frank Nello was telling Freddy Travis that he absolutely would *not* call the number stencilled on the sides of the drums—the number that would have put Nello in touch with Colonel Horace Grover and enabled Grover to locate the long-lost "contraband"—the colonel was driving his sleek, white Mark VII along the coastal highway from Camp Pendleton, California, to San Diego where he and his wife had a luxurious Spanish-style villa with a view of the sea. The villa and the Mark VII were perquisites not of his army salary but of his wife's inherited wealth. He liked living elegantly, much as it galled him to have his expensive tastes paid for by a woman he no longer loved. He was a bitter, disappointed man, greedy without being shrewd, ambitious without being clever. He didn't even care much for his mistress, who was quite plain. Rather than thinking that he might attract someone prettier if he lost weight and improved his own disposition and outlook, his idea was that he could afford to shack up with a nicer piece if he could spend more money on her, but there was a limit to how much knocking around he could get away with as long as his wife controlled the purse strings.

He figured that he would be a two-star or even a three-star general by now if it weren't for the stagnant frustration of Operation Drummer Boy. It had stymied his career; slowed down his promotions. While nobody could directly blame him for not being able to find the missing twenty-four drums, they weren't about to pat him on the back for it either. And he couldn't get a transfer away from the Operation. He had tried desperately to do so, but the need for secrecy was always cited; anybody new taking over the thing would have to be clued in; and it was best not to let the awful, embarrassing facts meander any farther. So Colonel Grover was stuck in a thankless, probably futile assignment where he could be a convenient whipping boy for the big brass if the snafu became even more snafued—which became likelier and likelier with each passing year as those drums, sitting somewhere, were bound to corrode and corrode and eventually leak and crack.

Pulling into his driveway, he detested the sight of the huge satellite

dish antenna on the roof, spoiling the looks of the villa. It was there because of Drummer Boy. He had to be in constant touch with the Operation even when he wasn't at Camp Pendleton where he was currently stationed. Even a fifty-mile drive down the coast didn't free him from the millstone around his neck that was far worse than any ordinary millstone because subconsciously it was weighted by twenty-four corpses in twenty-four lost steel drums.

He used the automatic garage-door opener to stow away the Mark VII. When he came into the kitchen, he greeted his wife Ethel with a peck on the cheek. He knew that he ought to give her a real smooch and a big hug so that she wouldn't suspect that maybe he hated her, but he couldn't bring himself to go to those lengths because she so utterly repulsed him. He found her body ugly and totally unsexy. She was short, flabby and stocky, just like him.

He tossed his gold-braided army hat on a chair, and she asked him how his day had been. He should've smiled warmly and mouthed some pleasantries, but he didn't. Instead he heard himself saying, "What do you think? The usual boring, demanding bullshit."

"I'm sorry, dear," said Ethel.

It goaded him that she prided herself in being understanding when she really didn't understand a damn thing. "What's for dinner?" he probed.

"Your favourite. Lamb chops."

"I had that for lunch," he snapped, taking a mild pleasure in seeing the bland look on her chubby face melt to dismay. He tossed his army coat on top of his hat in the chair, and walked through the living room into his study—a plush room of luxurious leather and dark wood panelling that his wife had lavished money on especially to please him. The big window here, behind his roll-top desk, had a wonderful view of the Pacific Ocean.

The colonel admired the view for a second, then crossed the tan shag carpet to the drinks cabinet and opened it. Inside was an extensive array of electronic communications equipment. He removed a card key from his wallet, slid it into the console, checked his watch, picked up a special telephone, and pressed a button. He got a coded tone sequence, then a password cue from a relay desk at Camp Pendleton. "This is Drummer Boy Eagle," he said, "checking in from Station Three at eighteen-hundred hours. I'll be home all evening."

When he signed off, he poured himself half a tumbler of Jack Daniels, neat, then turned around to see his wife looking at him, a mousy, timid expression on her face. He felt himself getting hot under the collar: she had come into his study where she was never allowed to intrude. He wanted to smack her or at least cuss her out, but with

great effort he held his temper—even poor timid wretches could only take so much abuse, and he had to remember that she was a *rich* timid wretch that he could not get along without for the time being.

“It’s nerve-wracking to live around so much equipment all the time,” she ventured.

“They have to be able to reach me twenty-four hours a day, wherever I am. You know that, dear.”

“Doesn’t that stuff operate on microwaves? What if it’s dangerous? It could be giving us cancer.”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “Operation Drummer Boy is giving me cancer all right, but not from microwaves.”

She penetrated even deeper into his study and put her arm around him, giving him goosebumps. “Dear,” she said, “I know how hard you’re working and what a strain you must be under.”

“You’re a very understanding wife, Ethel. I appreciate you … and … and I love you. One of these days, when we find the missing drums, we can have all the communications equipment taken out of here.”

“But when will they be found?”

“Christ, Ethel, I don’t know. It’s maddening … maddening. They could be anywhere. Anywhere!”

When his wife retreated from the study, he shut the door and sipped his Jack Daniels, gazing out at the ocean, wishing he had never heard of Operation Drummer Boy. He hated the thought of the traitor Raymond Aston probably languishing in comfort somewhere in the Soviet Union, after diverting the steel drums and murdering Colonel Peter Hoffman, who used to be Grover’s commanding officer when he was a first lieutenant.

“Death and destruction to all communist traitors and defectors!” Colonel Grover said out loud, raising his glass in a toast towards the Pacific Ocean before downing the whisky all in one gulp. An unabashed patriot, he said, “God save America,” as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

8

It was pitch black outside, except for occasional stabs of forked lightning from the impending storm. Legs and Meat were sitting by a tombstone, polishing off the bottle of cheap wine that the gang had earlier been passing around.

Legs said, “Do you ever fantasize about being killed?”

Meat turned towards her, noticing how, in a flash of lightning, her blue hair and blue regalia looked ghostly and unreal. “Being killed?” he said. “No, I don’t fantasize about it. It ain’t the sort of thing I get off on.”

It didn’t matter what he had said. Legs went on talking in her spaced-out, awestruck way, as if they were on the same wavelength. “Did you ever wonder about all the different ways of dying, you know, violently, and wonder, like, what would be the most horrible way to die?”

“I’d like to fuck myself to death,” Meat said, leering into the darkness. “How about it, babe? Wanna get me started?”

“Meat, be *serious!”* she shrieked. “Can’t you ever settle down and have a platonic, philosophical discussion?”

Playing along with her, Meat said, “I’d hate to burn to death. It must hurt like a bastard.”

Warming to the subject, Legs purred, “Um-hmmmm … all your flesh blackening and curling away from your bones, like when you toss pieces of cardboard into a fire. Not only would it feel bad, it would *look* bad. Remember how Freddy used to say, ‘Live fast, die young, and make a good-looking corpse’?”

“That was before him and Tina found Sunshine.”

“Yeah,” said Legs. “Those two haven’t been the same since. Like, I can understand feeling bad when a friend dies—I felt bad about Sunshine, too. We all did. But Freddy and Tina, they made a really heavy trip out of it, know what I mean? Like, they let it bum them out entirely too much, if you ask me.”

“It’s different for them,” said Meat. “They saw Sunshine dead. We didn’t.”

“It’s funny,” said Legs. “We used to tell Sunshine he was such a screw-up he’d even manage to screw up his own funeral—and he did just that. He lived fast and died young but I guess he didn’t make a very good-looking corpse.”

Meat remembered entering the funeral parlour and saying a prayer over Sunshine's closed casket. Not being able to view his friend in death made it hard to believe that death had truly occurred. When he pictured the person in the closed coffin, his mental image was close to how Sunshine had looked in life: blonde, cocky, slightly emaciated, but with perfect white teeth and a superb smile that had given him his nickname. Yet Meat knew that Sunshine didn't look that way any more. He was probably decked out in a conservative suit and tie instead of greasy jeans and motorcycle boots and Hare Krishna beads, and his skin was probably still all festered and puffy and green like Freddy and Tina had said.

If Meat still believed in his parents' old-fashioned, bible-pounding, shrieking and groaning hymn-shouting Negro Baptist religion, he could've been comforted by the thought of Sunshine arising on Judgement Day, his body made whole and beautiful, to frolic in eternal bliss in the presence of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But Meat was an agnostic; it was one of the things that had got him thrown out of his parents' home. He could no longer talk to God with any confidence that anyone up there was listening, so the prayer he said for Sunshine's corpse was one he made up, not out of any prayer book, pronouncing his deep personal wish that Sunshine would receive the best of whatever there was to enjoy or receive after earthly life, if there *was* anything, and that his survivors and loved ones would remember him well and not judge him too harshly, and not suffer too much in their grief.

As Meat turned from the coffin after silently expressing these sentiments, he was attacked by Sunshine's mother—a frail, red-eyed, surprisingly strong little woman—who flailed at him, screaming and striking his face and body with her bony fists, accusing him of being the "no-good nigger dope fiend" who had corrupted her son and brought him to an early grave. The other white folks in the funeral parlour weren't in any big hurry to subdue Sunshine's old lady and calm her down. Meat's face was bleeding from being clawed and he was pretty shook up when he pushed his way out to the street.

Recalling it, as he sat with Legs, leaning against a tombstone, he swigged down the last of the wine and asked her, "You think all of us are in a way to blame for what happened to Sunshine?"

"No way!" Legs snapped. "No guilt trips for *me,* buster!"

"I mean," said Meat, "maybe we could've tried a lot harder to get him off the hard stuff."

"We *did* try, but he wouldn't listen. If you ask me, he had a self-destructive personality." Legs giggled. "I guess we *all* do—the whole gang of us. But Sunshine was a lot worse. He was a lot further gone

than the rest of us. I don't know … maybe he got what he wanted. Maybe he's happier now, you know?"

"Happier?"

"Like if there's a heaven."

"Oh."

"You don't believe in it?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, anyway," said Legs, "an O.D. wouldn't be such a terrible way to go … all blissed out … you'd be gone before you even realized you were tripping away. For me the worst death'd be for a bunch of horrible men, like cannibals, to mob me … and start eating me alive. I saw that in a movie once."

"So did I," said Meat. Recalling how scary the movie had been, he shuddered, glad of the darkness so that Legs couldn't see him being uncool.

"First … the cannibals would tear my clothes off," Legs said. She giggled playfully.

Meat heard her squirming around. Then, in a flash of lightning, he saw that she was unbuttoning her blouse. "Hey, Suicide!" he yelled. "Let's get some light over here! Legs is taking her clothes off!"

Giggling from somewhere deep in the cemetery, Suicide lit a highway flare and, like an altar boy holding a sparking candle, he led a procession comprised of Chuck, Casey, Scuz and Tina over to where Legs was doing her spontaneous striptease. He jabbed the wire prong of the flare into the ground at the foot of the tombstone, and the sputtering orange light illuminated Legs' well-sculpted torso, naked in the darkness. To the beat of some wild electronic music coming from Scuz's ghetto blaster, she began to do a slow, seductive dance.

"Take it off, babe! Take it *all* off!" Suicide drooled. He jumped around clapping his hands, the pointy metal studs of his dog collar glinting in the shimmering orange flare-light. Following his lead, the whole gang started to clap to the beat, except Tina, who hung back, eyeing the warehouse across the way and wishing Freddy would come out.

Getting carried away by her dance and by being the centre of attention, Legs leapt to the top of the tombstone, balancing herself on its wide scalloped edge. Undulating slowly, she caressed her upturned breasts, leaning back, massaging and squeezing till her large nipples hardened and jutted. Then she unzipped her blue plastic shorts.

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" yelled Suicide.

"Get down … get down, babe," said Meat.

Legs peeled off her plastic shorts and tossed them into the darkness.

Nude except for her blue plastic boots and blue leg-warmers, she spread her long, slim, beautiful legs and began to arch her pelvis and shimmy her hips slowly and deliberately, as if she were having sex, impaled by some invisible presence.

“Wow! Ooh … wow!” said Suicide, “Is that how she gives it to you, Scuz?”

“Whaddayou think?” said Scuz, wanting Suicide to envy him.

“Man … man … let *me* have a turn with her,” Suicide pleaded.

“Get out, she ain’t that kinda girl,” said Scuz.

The thrusts of Legs’ pelvis were coming faster and harder, and she was losing the beat of the music. Her eyes had a glazed look, and she was biting her lip and moaning, continuing her frantic undulations on top of the tombstone.

Tina couldn’t watch. It was embarrassing. Legs was actually reaching an orgasm all by herself, right in front of everybody. In the sputtering orange glare, the whole scene was unbelievably bizarre and unreal and … and sacrilegious. Legs really *was* defiling a cemetery. It almost seemed like she was copulating with a spirit of the dead—an evil, lustful spirit that must have arisen from beneath the tombstone she was dancing on.

Even though Tina thought she had completely shed the rigid religious tenets of her childhood, the concept of sin was heavily ingrained into her subconscious. Denying this, she told herself that she really *wasn’t* square any longer, there were just certain kinds of behaviour that she couldn’t get on with; it wasn’t square to be turned off by pointless disrespect and mockery of other people’s beliefs. What Legs was doing fell into that category Tina felt, and she had an atavistic sense that Legs would be, or ought to be, punished for it.

Tina had been raised a strict Roman Catholic in an Italian-American family—parochial school, the whole bit, including a great deal of pressure from the nuns when she was in senior high school to make a decision to enter a convent. But then, as her parents would say, she “had fallen in with the wrong crowd”. What had really happened, in her own opinion, was that she had started to *think*. She had bought a paperback of Mark Twain’s *Letters from the Earth,* and that single irreverent, humorous, satirical and iconoclastic book had pierced the dogma of her upbringing with a crack of light and fresh air. But when she tried to express some of her new questions and feelings the nuns and priests were outraged, and told her parents she was in danger of becoming a heathen, on the road to hell. Tina’s mother and father promptly clamped down on her, to force her to be the good, obedient little girl they had thought they were raising. Because she had a streak of spunk and rambunctiousness, the fierce effort to suppress her only

led to a more determined, and at times a more foolhardy, rebellion.

She stopped reading and studying and started running around. The intellectual quest that had started the trouble was abandoned and largely forgotten, trampled in the climate of passion and confrontation. Tina became a street brat, defying her parents' conservatism by a pursuit of its diametric opposite, unbridled hedonism. She had been born with a good mind that could have been developed with enlightened guidance and stimulation. Instead, although she still possessed a capacity for subtle perceptions and delicate, refined emotions, that capacity was dulled and blunted by the frantically superficial life style she had fallen into.

Finding Sunshine dead had been enough of a jolt to make her question, at long last, how and why she was wasting herself. But she wasn't strong enough to break away completely, and maybe she never would be. The nearest object of any hint or plausibility of strength was Freddy Travis. Along with her, he had been changed by a shocking experience. Perhaps together they could continue to change for the better.

She clung to her love for Freddy, averting her eyes from Legs' wild, naked cavorting, wishing her boyfriend would come out of the warehouse.

9

Burt Wilson was fuming, but Freddy hardly cared; he was too sick and exhausted. Burt was in plaid Bermuda shorts, a yellow windbreaker, and a floppy golfer's hat. His freckled face turned as red as his hair as he listened to Frank Nello lamely trying to explain what had happened.

"You did *what?"* Burt moaned. "You *opened* it? You stupid morons! You *idiots!* You're screwing up my warehouse and my barbecue!" With an angry gesture, he pushed his heavy, black-framed glasses up his nose.

When Burt had first shown up, he had bitched about the impending rain and employees who couldn't handle a tough situation without crying to the boss for help—but that was before Frank showed him the split dog writhing on the floor and took him to the padlocked cooler to hear the screaming and the pounding. Now, Freddy suspected, a certain amount of Burt's cussing out of himself and Frank had to do with the boss's need to deny the veracity of the inhuman part of the situation. The whining of the split dog and the screaming and pounding of the corpse could still be heard through the office door.

"Well," Frank Nello said sheepishly, smacking his desk top with the palm of his hand, "what are we gonna do?"

Burt started raving again. "Do? Do? We're going to be sued by Darrow Chemical and be investigated by the government, and become very, very famous, and lose all our business and go to jail, that's what we're going to do!" As he raved, he paced all around the office, glowering, and flinching with every scream of the cadaver in the cold room. "On the other hand, if we do not wish for all those bad things to happen to us, we will destroy all the evidence and then shut our mouths."

Frank pounced upon the suggestion. "Yes, that's *it!* Let's do that!"

"Yes, I agree," said Burt, "It's the only way. But before we commit ourselves to such a drastic course of action, I have just one itsy-bitsy question: are you absolutely certain that person screaming out there is a *dead cadaver?"*

"Open the door and find out," Frank challenged with a ghastly, unfunny grin.

Burt wiped sweat off his brow and wiped his hand on his Bermuda shorts. "All right, all right, I believe you, I don't have to see it with my own eyes right now, I saw the split dog. At least I *think* I saw it, if I'm

not actually going nuts and dreaming all of this up. All right." He ran his hand through his wavy red hair, dark red from sweat. "Well, if it *is* a reanimated body, we'll have to kill it."

Freddy blurted, "How do you kill something that's already dead?"

"Shut up, I'm thinking," said Burt, still pacing feverishly. "Christ, Frank, what the hell did it say in that *National Enquirer* article you showed me some years ago?"

"Nothing. Nothing about killing them. But in some of the ghoul movies, they killed them by destroying the brain."

"The brain! Right!" said Burt. "What the hell do we have around here that can destroy a brain?"

Freddy said, "What do doctors use to get into skulls?" He couldn't help thinking that as much as his own skull ached, he might have to have an operation himself to kill the pain.

"Doctors use surgical drills," said Frank. "But as much as that friggin' cadaver is jumpin' around, who's gonna hold it down and drill it?"

Freddy shuddered at the mere thought of entering the cold room, let alone going into hand-to-hand combat with a cadaver.

"C'mon!" said Burt Wilson. "I got something that's just the ticket!"

He opened the office door and barged out, and since he was their boss, Frank and Freddy reluctantly followed him. Hanging on the wall outside the office was a big red fire axe with a big pointed spike behind the blade. Burt seized it and handed it to Frank. "Frank, you take this. Atta boy," Burt said.

Apprehensively, Frank took hold of the axe, eyeing the spike and the sharp blade, wondering whether he could actually do a job with a weapon such as that or if it could somehow be turned against him.

"Now listen carefully," said Burt. "Freddy, you're going to open the cold-room door. Frank, when that cadaver comes out, you brain it with the axe."

"What if it's still in the drawer? It may still be in the drawer," Frank pointed out.

"If it is, Freddy will have to slide the drawer open … and the rest of the plan stays the same. You brain it with the axe, Frank."

"What are *you* gonna do, Burt?"

"I'm gonna supervise. *I* didn't get us into this mess. We have to put that cadaver out of its misery."

The screaming and pounding got louder and louder as they advanced towards the cold-storage room.

Perspiring heavily, Frank said, "I don't know if I can do this, Burt."

“You’d better. You got us into this. You, kid, go over by the door.”

Sweat popped out all over Freddy’s face. Like Frank, he felt terribly weak and he ached in every muscle and joint. His stomach was so nauseous it felt like his insides were rotting. But he stationed himself by the freezer-room door as Frank hefted the axe.

Burt Wilson said, “The combination on that padlock is thirty-four left, nine right, twelve left.” He backed up, close to a huge wooden packing crate that he could hide behind.

Freddy got a grip on himself and spun the combination dial on the padlock. Clickety, clickety, clickety … left … right … left. Then, with great caution, he pulled the padlock open and lifted it out of the hasp. The screaming and pounding from inside the cold-storage room increased in intensity, and the door came ajar all by itself. Freddy jumped back, but nothing leapt out at him.

“It must still be in the drawer!” said Frank. “Thank God!” He crossed himself for the umpteenth time today, transferring the fire axe to his left hand to do so.

“Christ, don’t let go of the axe!” yelled Burt, peeking from behind the packing crate.

“This is a bad time to take the Lord’s name in vain,” said Frank.

“Go on in!” cried Burt. “Go ahead in and do it, Freddy!”

“L-let’s just l-lock it up again,” Freddy suggested, “If w-we could get hold of a g-grenade somewhere, we could c-come back and toss it in there.”

“Where the hell are we gonna get a grenade?” Burt scoffed. “This is a *medical* supply warehouse! For God’s sake, be brave, kid. Now is the time you’ve gotta have some real guts!” But he did all his talking from behind the packing crate.

“I’m not gonna slide open that drawer unless you come in and help me,” Freddy said, suddenly not giving a shit if he got fired for insubordination. His fear of his boss was submerged by his fear of the cadaver. “That thing may not be *in* the drawer,” he added, “It may be *lurking,* just waiting for me to go in the cold room.”

“Shit! Let’s stop bickering and get this over with!” said Frank. “My friggin’ nerves can’t take it any more!” But he had to think twice about the fact that the screaming and pounding from the cold room had stopped. Freddy could be right: the cadaver might be lurking. With a sudden summoning of courage, Frank used the axe handle to nudge open the freezer door. It squeaked as it slowly swung on its hinges.

Freddy screamed.

The pounding started up again, more ferociously. To their great

relief, the three men saw that it was the drawer rattling. The cadaver was still in its freezer compartment, struggling to get out.

"This makes it a lot easier," said Burt. "All we'll have to do is slide the drawer out enough to smash its head with the axe." He came out from behind the packing crate. "Go on in, you guys. I'll be right behind you."

Mustering his last ounce of bravery, Freddy said to himself: I can go in there, I got my shit together. But his legs were so weak his knees wobbled as he approached the waist-high drawer that held the cadaver. Burt stepped up beside him, his mouth hanging open as if he wanted to throw up. Frank took a position squarely in front of the drawer, the axe upraised.

"Do it, for God's sake!" Frank urged. "Don't *think* about it. *Do* it before I change my mind and shag ass!"

Freddy and Burt each took a grip on the drawer on opposite sides and started pulling it out. The screaming corpse stared up at them, hideous-looking, with yellow, jaundiced skin and dry eyeballs. At first just the head was visible … then the dead, puckered hands got a clawing grip on the stainless-steel top of the freezer compartment.

Frank swung the axe as hard as he could in his weakened condition.

The pick end of the axe cracked through the cadaver's forehead, but it didn't die. Instead it screamed, kicked and clawed, bucking and thrashing like a demented man with quadruple the strength of ordinary, sane mortals. Frank lost his balance and fell, still clutching the axe handle, staggering backwards, and because the pick was still embedded in the head of the cadaver Frank's momentum pulled the drawer open and the cadaver rolled out. Winded, Frank let go of the axe. Burt and Freddy jumped and yelled. The screaming dead man writhing on the floor got hold of the axe blade and pulled the spike out of his forehead, then hurled the axe aside, banging it off the steel freezer.

Frank lay dazed where he had fallen. Burt and Freddy both got their feet unfrozen at about the same time and bumped and wedged into each other in their effort to flee through the doorway. The dead man jumped at the two men, knocking them both the rest of the way out of the cold-storage room and retaining a grip on Burt, choking and clawing him. The dead man started to sink his teeth into Burt's face. But Frank stumbled out of the cold-storage room and got a choke-hold on the corpse. Then Freddy recovered enough to help Frank, and Burt managed to roll free, yelling, "It bit me! The son-of-a-bitch!" He ran into the cold-storage room and got the axe. By that time, Frank and Freddy had the cadaver momentarily subdued, wrestled to the floor with its arms twisted up behind its back; but it was snarling and

snapping at them with its teeth.

Burt yelled, “Hold its shoulders to the floor!”

Frank and Freddy did their best to pin the naked, struggling dead man on his back in one spot. Burt then took careful aim and swung the axe. *Pow! Crunch!* The pick end of the axe bit into the cadaver’s skull, taking a much deeper bite than before because of the damage already done and because Burt wasn’t in as weakened a condition as Frank. The spike went all the way through the skull, nailing the cadaver to the wooden floor. It let out a tremendous howl and bucked and thrashed even more violently. No blood flowed from its wounds. Frank and Freddy hung on. With the axe pinning its head, the cadaver squirmed like a butterfly on a pin, screaming. “Burt! I can’t hold on much longer!” Frank cried.

Burt ran to a warehouse shelf, ripped open a cardboard box, and frantically unwrapped a surgeon’s saw for sawing bone. He yelled at Frank and Freddy, “Hang on tight!”

Frank and Freddy threw their entire weight over the length of the corpse’s body, pressing its torso and legs as flat as possible, and pinning its arms down. Burt got down on his knees and started sawing off the struggling thing’s head, cutting into bloodless flesh and screeching neckbone.

Finally, the body was separated from the head. The body relaxed and twitched. The tongue lolled from the side of the mouth. With great relief Frank and Freddy stood up, and immediately the cadaver’s body jumped up and ran off, leaving the head still pinned to the floor by the axe.

“Christ!” Burt yelled.

“Jesus protect us,” Frank muttered.

“Oh, no … oh, no,” Freddy mumbled.

The cadaver’s body, like a headless chicken, ran right into a tier of shelving and fell down—but it got back up again and kept going, turning a corner.

“We gotta tackle it!” cried Burt.

The three men went after the headless corpse and leapt upon it, pummelling it to the floor and subduing it once again. “Rope! Rope! Get rope!” Burt yelled.

Frank left Freddy and Burt to hold the corpse down while he found some coils of hemp. Quickly, they tied up the bucking and thrashing dead body.

“Christ, why isn’t it dying?” said Frank.

Burt said, “You told us if we destroyed the brain that’d be it.”

“It worked in those movies!” Frank said.

"It ain't working now!" said Burt.

"The movie was just fiction *based on* fact," Frank reminded.

They examined the body, still writhing, and the head still nailed to the floor, snapping and snarling.

"So how do we kill it?" Frank wondered aloud.

The three men stared at each other, considering the implications.

"We'll have to destroy it completely," Burt said. "Until there's nothing left."

"Acid!" Frank exclaimed.

"What kind of acid do you dissolve a body with?" Freddy asked.

Burt told him, "Sulphuric acid should do it. Better yet, aqua regia."

Freddy said, "What if it doesn't dissolve everything? Like the bones?"

Burt ran his fingers through his hair, thinking desperately. "Cremation might be a better answer," he said finally.

"Cremation! That's the ticket!" said Frank.

"Oh, when will this ever end?" Freddy moaned. "My girlfriend Tina is gonna *hate* me—*if* I ever see her again. She was supposed to meet me outside at eight. I hope she didn't wait. I hope she went home."

"Your girlfriend is the *least* of your worries, kid," said Burt.

But Tina was very much on Freddy's mind. He just wanted to be with her. If he could find his way out of this nightmare.

"How the hell are we gonna cremate this thing?" said Frank. "We don't even have an oven."

"Ernie Kaltenbrunner," said Burt. "The embalmer at the mortuary next to the cemetery."

"He has a crematorium over there?" Frank asked.

"Yep."

"A crematorium, that's good! But do you think he'll go along with it?"

"He and I are poker buddies."

"But what the hell are you gonna tell him, Burt? Can you trust him?"

"I'll have to. I just hope he's at home, or better yet, working late over there. Let's go to the office and I'll phone him."

"Do *I* have to go to the crematorium?" asked Freddy.

"Yeah, kid, you're in this all the way," said Frank. "Me and you, we gotta stick together now. You know?" He gave Freddy a wink, as if they were both privy to some deep secret that didn't include Burt Wilson or anybody else.

“Are you still sick?” Freddy asked.

“Yeah, sick as a dog. Sick as a *split* dog.” Frank chuckled, trying to make light of it.

“Me, too,” said Freddy. He considered just cutting the hell out of there, quitting his job, letting Frank and Burt take care of the creepy business at the crematorium. But there were two factors that were preventing him from splitting. One was that he was amazing himself—*proving* himself—by the amount of bravery he had exhibited so far; he was getting back his self-respect, and he didn’t want to flush it down the drain. And the second factor was that he sensed the kinship with Frank Nello that Frank had tried to convey with the wink of his eye. In a subtle, metaphysical way that Freddy felt deeply but did not consciously understand, ever since that gas squirted in their faces he and Frank were bound together, sufferers on the same journey … changing … evolving … facing the same dread.

10

Ernie Kaltenbrunner, aged thirty-six, a wiry, sandy-haired man with a bony face and wide, thick lips, had been having a busy evening even before he got the phone call from Burt Wilson. He had to get a banker and his wife both embalmed, patched up, and laid out for Thursday morning. Fourth of July was tomorrow, Wednesday. If Ernie expected to have any part of the holiday free for himself, he'd have to stay at the mortuary till the wee hours tonight working on the two corpses. Now Burt Wilson was coming over here in some kind of trouble that was going to eat up even more of Ernie's precious time.

He tried to get done as much as possible before Burt showed up. It wasn't a piece of cake. The banker and his wife, Morton and Flelen Dowden, had both been killed in a terrible car crash. Ernie had their nude mangled bodies before him, side by side, with a work aisle in between, on two separate embalming tables.

Morton Dowden's body was in two pieces. In the twisting, shattering impact made upon his Cadillac by a grocery van that had lost its brakes on a high-speed highway, his torso had been completely severed by the jagged windscreen that had been transformed into a gigantic rip saw, tearing him apart diagonally just beneath the rib cage. Surprisingly, there were only a few cuts and scratches on his face, arms and legs.

Helen Dowden was a different story. Both of her hands had been cut off, and her nose was missing—in its place was a blood-caked hole. Judging from the rouge and lipstick that she still wore, her face had received a lot of cosmetic attention in life, as women were wont to do, and it was going to require even more in death.

The Dowdens' grief-stricken, beautiful twenty-year-old daughter had insisted that she didn't want a closed-casket funeral; she would pay whatever it cost to make Mom and Pop look good. She had given Ernie Kaltenbrunner eight-by-ten portraits to work from. He could see that they had been a handsome couple, and could take a professional pride in restoring their attractiveness under such challenging circumstances. He could picture them graciously mingling at the country club affair they had been driving to—both with thick white hair expensively barbered and coiffed, both with blandly amiable smiles on their ruddy faces, and both with fashionable, well-tailored clothes on their slightly overweight bodies. He decided that he would try to make them appear as though they had arrived at the country

club, suited and gowned, and had taken a notion to lie down for a moment in the presence of the other guests.

The first thing Ernie did was to scoop out Morton Dowden's internal organs and pack them in sealable plastic bags, laced with disinfectant. Then he packed cotton batting into the abdominal and chest cavities to prevent seepage of fluids as much as possible. When this was done, he wired and stapled the corpse's torso back together, looping the wires between the legs and around the groin, and stapling them to the rib bones. Then he sewed the flesh together, using a fine but strong thread of monofilament and making neat, close stitches to further ensure against leakage. Finally, he slipped a wide elastic corset, padded inside like a piece of large sticking plaster, up over the hip and around the torso, protecting and reinforcing the repair job.

"You're good as new, Morton," Ernie told his "patient".

He turned his attention to Helen Dowden, stapling and stitching her severed hands so that they were firmly reattached. "There, Helen, don't worry about this not looking absolutely neat," he consoled her. "You'll be wearing a lovely pair of elbow-length evening gloves, and so long as you and I don't tell anyone, they'll never guess your secret."

Embalming Helen Dowden wasn't any special problem. He inserted the injection needle in the carotid artery and the drainage needle in the jugular vein and got the pump going, replacing blood with embalming fluid. The circulatory system was a closed circuit, enabling the machinery to do its job without any disruptions, except for the vessels severed at the wrists where the incisions had to be watched for leakage, and the hands which had to be separately injected with embalming solution.

The difficulty with Morton Dowden was, of course, that his circulatory system had been aborted—ripped in half with the rest of his body. It meant that Ernie had to embalm all of the body parts separately. However, because of the "severity" of the "wound", virtually all of the blood had already drained. So it was a matter of making sure enough embalming fluid got to the tissues.

Ernie had barely completed the embalming of the husband and wife when the night bell rang. He opened a drawer in his mortician-supply cabinet, and pulled out the large black Luger that he kept for personal protection. Then he went to the side door of the embalming room, looked through the peephole, and saw Burt Wilson standing outside in the floppy golfer's hat he usually wore to their Saturday-night poker sessions.

Burt jumped back when Ernie opened the door. "Chrissake! You gonna *shoot* me or something?"

Ernie glanced down at the Luger but forgot to point it aside. "Gotta

have this for self-protection against the creepos who hang around this neighbourhood at night. Sometimes I hear funny noises in the cemetery across the way—people carrying on, playing loud music. You'd think they'd have some respect for the dead. Couple weeks ago we had some tombstones overturned, graves desecrated. Tonight I thought I heard some weird sounds and saw some sparklers or something. But if I called the cops whoever's whooping it up over there would bug out soon as they heard the sirens, and if *I* took time to check it out I'd probably shoot somebody. Crazy kids could be scoring dope over there, for all *I* know."

While Ernie was yacking, Burt gingerly nudged the muzzle of the Luger away from his belly, and Ernie took the hint and put the gun back in its drawer.

"You look green around the gills," Ernie said. "Do you want some hot coffee to perk you up?"

"No coffee for me," Burt said, turning a bit greener when he followed Ernie into the area where the patched-up bodies of Morton and Helen Dowden reposed on the embalming tables.

"Well, I'm going to have some," said Ernie. He went to the Mr. Coffee machine and poured himself a steaming cup. Sipping it, he stared at the place where Helen Dowden's nose ought to have been, like an artist contemplating his next brush stroke. "Gotta make her a new one," he said. "She won't be able to use it for breathing, but I don't think she'll mind as long as it *looks* good." He took another sip of coffee, then he gave Burt a sharp, probing look. "Sorry to have to tell you, you hit me on a busy night, Burt. You mentioned an 'urgent problem' on the phone?"

Burt cleared his throat, "If I asked you to keep a *very* important secret, could you?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Ernie, I need your help in a big way."

"You can depend on me, you know that. What's wrong?"

"I've got a couple of my men outside. Mind if I bring them in?"

"Sure, what's the big deal, Burt?"

"They're gonna bring something in with them. I have to warn you, Ernie, old pal, old poker buddy. What they're gonna bring in here is pretty horrible."

"Burt … level with me," said Ernie, suddenly much more worried about what he was letting himself in for. "Did you *kill* somebody?"

"In a way, I wish I did," said Burt, smiling a mirthlessly enigmatic smile. "I wish to God I had killed what I *tried* to kill."

11

Tina Vitali couldn't believe it. Legs was actually letting that ignorant slob Suicide put his … his thing into her. While she was dancing naked on the tombstone he had taken his shirt and pants off and had stood in front of Legs with a big erection, wearing nothing but a studded dog collar. Then she had leapt on to him, wrapping her great legs around his scrawny, pimpled butt. Now they were going at it like mad, right on top of the grave. Meat and Casey had wandered off somewhere, probably doing it on top of some other grave. And Chuck and Scuz were leaning against the tombstone toking a joint and watching Suicide and Legs doing it in the sputtering glare of the road flare that was half burned out.

Tina felt *all the way* burned out. She couldn't watch this scene any longer or she'd freak out. She'd go totally bananas and have to be locked away somewhere in some funny farm. Suddenly she didn't like her friends, and knew that she didn't want to be like them. She had a clear vision of what she would become if she didn't break away, and it wasn't a pretty picture.

Only half realizing what she was doing, she found herself slowly stepping backwards, backing away, melting soundlessly into the darkness. Then she turned and walked faster. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. She hurried her pace, towards the stone arch of Resurrection Cemetery. When she passed under the arch and back out on to the sidewalk it was like she was leaving her past behind her, except for Freddy Travis. He was the only one she needed to take with her into a brighter, saner future.

She heard a door slam, and when she looked down the block into the side lot of Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home, to her great amazement she thought she saw Freddy. It *was* Freddy! He had just slammed shut the back doors of a white van with UNEEDA MEDICAL SUPPLY written on it in big red letters. But what would he be doing at a funeral home?

"Freddy!" Tina cried. "Freddy!"

He turned, surprised at the sound of her voice and the clicking of her high heels as she hurried towards him. He recognized her for sure as she passed under a street lamp. They fell into each other's arms and kissed beside the van, in the glare of the yellow bug light over the side door of the embalming room.

"Freddy," she murmured. "Oh, Freddy, I'm so glad to see you. But what are you doing here?"

“Uh … I … a special delivery,” he stammered.

“At a funeral home? I would’ve thought that anybody in *there* would be beyond the help of any sort of medical supply.”

“You don’t understand, it’s—”

“Will you be getting off work soon? It’s well past eight o’clock. I can’t wait for us to be together. There’s so many things I want to tell you about … I mean, it all came together for me today. This is going to be a brand new start for us, I can just *feel* it!”

She hugged Freddy again and planted a big smacker. Just then, lightning and thunder erupted in a tremendous flash and roar, and Frank Nello came out of the embalming room. Feeling like a Peeping Tom, he stood by watching Freddy and Tina kiss, a long drawn-out one with their eyes closed. When they finally came up for air, he said, “I take it this is your girlfriend, kid?”

“Uh … yeah,” Freddy stammered. “Tina Vitali … meet my boss … Frank Nello.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Tina. “Freddy and I have a date tonight when he gets off. Do you mind if I wait for him in the van, Mr. Nello?”

“Better not do that,” Frank said nervously.

“It’s gonna rain is all she meant,” Freddy said pleadingly.

“That’s okay, forget I asked,” said Tina, wondering why Freddy was acting so strangely.

The embalming room door banged open and Burt Wilson leaned out, glowering. “Frank! Freddy! Come *on,* damnit. The stuff you lugged in is squirming all over the floor in here! We got no time to piss around in the parking lot!”

“Er … sorry, but my girlfriend just showed up,” Freddy apologized.

“Well, get rid of her till later!”

“Uh … boss?” Frank Nello said to Burt. “We can’t let her stay out here—there’s gonna be a downpour. And I don’t believe we want her inside either. Why don’t I give her my key, so she can wait for Freddy back at the warehouse? We got everything cleaned up back there. She can’t get in any trouble, and she’ll be out of our hair till we do what needs to be done.”

“Can she be trusted?” Burt demanded, glowering at Freddy.

“Sure, boss,” Freddy said.

“Give her the damn keys, then,” Burt said wearily. “And get in here! I need you two guys for moral support.” He went back in, slamming the door.

“Here, Tina,” Frank said, handing her his keyring, “It’s this big one here—the front door. Pull it shut and lock it after you go in, then wait for us in the office.”

"Thank you," said Tina.

"No problem," said Frank. "Me and Freddy are buddies. We been through a lot in just two days, right, kid?" He winked and went into the embalming room, leaving Freddy alone with Tina.

She said, "Freddy? Tell me the truth, is something goofy going on? Are you in trouble?"

"No," he lied. "Why?"

"The guy in the Bermuda shorts mentioned something squirming on the floor in there. I can't imagine what he meant, but it gave me the creeps."

"Believe me, Tina, it's better if I don't tell you what he meant, so please don't ask, okay? Just go to the warehouse and wait for me. Everything's gonna be okay, I promise." He took off his red baseball cap and handed it to her. "Wear this in case you get caught in the rain. I really gotta go now. The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can be with you." He backed away from her and put his hand on the doorknob.

"Bye, Freddy, I'll be waiting for you, so please hurry," Tina said worriedly, putting on his red baseball cap, which almost matched her red plastic miniskirt.

"Bye, honey," he said, then went into the embalming room and closed the door behind him.

Tina stared at the door for a moment, then decided to just walk to the warehouse as fast as she could, to try to beat the rain. She pulled the red cap down over her long black hair, thinking what a touching gesture it had been for Freddy to give it to her. At a loss to picture exactly what kind of squirmy things on the floor he had to deal with before he could get off work, she found herself silently saying a Hail Mary for him as she walked. It was the second time she had prayed in many months—the first time had been for Sunshine. Even though she had rebelled against the dogma of her Catholic upbringing, the need to pray occasionally overwhelmed her in times of trial. But because she remained a doubter, she didn't really know if giving in to prayer at these times was a strength or a weakness.

In this run-down section of Louisville, the night-time streets were totally deserted. To Tina, it was creepy, and the impending rain made it even creepier. Sometimes as she walked she could smell steaming garbage and stale urine coming from the alleys, while in the distance she heard faint, tantalizing sounds of livelier, prettier sections of the city. Every once in a while the pools of light cast by widely spaced street lamps were augmented by horrendous flashes of lightning that for a few shuddering seconds made everything as bright as daylight.

Approaching the warehouse, Tina saw lights burning in a couple of

grimy windows. The huge black barge of a building looked forbidding instead of comforting. She considered just sitting on the concrete steps out front and not going inside unless the rain started to come down. She felt spooky, and suddenly cold. “Don’t be silly, there’s nothing to be afraid of in there,” she muttered to herself, and put Frank Nello’s key in the steel door with a deadbolt lock. She hesitated, then turned the key. No sooner had she pushed the door open than she heard a hoarse, desperate voice coming from somewhere deep inside the warehouse:

“Heeelllp … Pleeease … heeelllp … meeee!”

Tina jumped back. She almost slammed the door and ran, but the voice sounded so piteous, so desperate. She’d never forgive herself for abandoning someone who needed her help. It could be one of Freddy’s fellow workers who had had some kind of accident while nobody was around. The voice cried out again:

“Heelllp … Pleeease … heeelllp …”

It was getting weaker and hoarser and more desperate. Responding to its urgency Tina stepped quickly into the warehouse and shut the steel door, but forgot to turn the knob that must be turned to secure the deadbolt from inside.

“Where are you?” she called out. “I’m here … Where are you?”

She moved through dark shadows, past the office door, into the bay with its tiers of shelving and stacks of crated medical supplies.

“Dooowwnnn … heeerrrre …” the weak voice croaked.

Tina found her way to the cellar door. Then she heard the voice once again, pleading for help. She opened the door and saw nothing but blackness. She groped for the light switch and found it, and the naked light bulb came on, illuminating the deep, treacherous stairwell.

“Huurryyyy … I’m … dooowwwnnnn … heerrre …” the pitiful voice whispered.

Tina peered into the cellar, craning her neck, repulsed by the smell of dampness and dankness. But, unable to ignore the sufferer who must be down there, she held her breath and started down the stairs.

Meanwhile, Freddy Travis was listening to an argument between Burt Wilson and Ernie Kaltenbrunner. Freddy and Frank had carried in seven big heavy-duty brown plastic garbage bags from the van, and had deposited the writhing, squirming bags in the middle of the embalming-room floor. Ernie had taken one look at them and had refused to cremate them. “There’s something *alive* in those bags!” he had told Burt, his green eyes flashing angrily. “You’ve got a nerve,

friendship or not! I am not about to just burn something alive without knowing what it is—or even *with* knowing what it is, for that matter!"

"Ernie, I can't *tell* you what it is," Burt had wailed, "I'm asking you to trust me. What's in those bags definitely needs burning."

But Ernie had refused to trust Burt that much, and they had reached an impasse. In the lull, Ernie had gone about his business, making a new nose for Helen Dowden that was remarkably like her original one. The new one was made of Dermawax, molded and blended into her face. It looked good enough to breathe out of. Freddy was both fascinated and repulsed by the mortician's clever work every time he stole a glance at it.

The brown plastic bags continued to squirm on the floor, and Freddy kept a nervous watch to make sure none of them edged closer to him. He was stationed alongside Frank Nello, midway between the bags and the embalming tables. After sculpting the new nose, Ernie Kaltenbrunner took hold of one of Helen Dowden's arms and started bending it. It appeared to be stiff, and it was with an effort that he massaged and bent it, a little at a time.

Burt Wilson, who had fallen silent in his effort to think up a fresh approach to talking Ernie into cremating the contents of the plastic bags, spoke for the first time in several minutes. "Ernie … what the hell are you doing?"

"Breaking out the rigor mortis."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Rigor mortis starts in the brain," Ernie explained. "Then it moves to the internal organs, and finally settles in the muscles. See?" He pinched Helen on her bicep, "It wears off after a while, but you can 'break it out' manually by flexing the muscles. I have to do this if I want to get her and her husband in shape for laying them out in natural poses."

"I see," said Burt. He cleared his throat. "Ernie, you gotta burn these bags for me. *Please.* I'm asking you as a pal and a poker buddy."

"Not without knowing what's inside," Ernie insisted, continuing to flex and massage Helen Dowden's body.

"Okay … Okay," Burt said, approaching Ernie and putting his hand on his shoulder, "I'll tell you what's in the bags, so you'll understand why we can't risk opening them. Rabid weasels—that's what's in there, honest."

"What!" said Ernie. "What are you doing with a bunch of rabid weasels?" He stopped flexing Helen Dowden's naked right leg and stepped over to the pile of squirmy bags, gazing down at them.

Burt gingerly stepped behind Ernie, sticking close to him. "I'm

trying to explain to you, Ernie, they came in as part of a shipment. They weren't supposed to be rabid, but … you know how these things happen."

Frank and Freddy were looking on, almost disinterested in the discussion except for their desire to get the grisly business done and get out of there, "I'm still sick as hell and my head hurts," Freddy whispered to Frank. "Do you feel the same way?" Frank nodded glumly.

"Rabid weasels?" Ernie Kaltenbrunner mumbled disbelievingly, and bent to untie one of the brown plastic bags.

"Watch it, Ernie. You don't want to get bit!" Burt hastily cautioned him.

Ernie stood up, blinking his eyes questioningly at Burt, saying, "Frankly … I don't think I believe you … poker buddy or not."

Burt shouted, "I'm *telling* you there's rabid *weasels* in those bags and we have to destroy them! It's our friggin' civic *duty* for Chrissake!"

Unperturbed, Ernie suggested, "Why don't you call the animal shelter?"

"If the story got out it might hurt my business. You know, rabies and everything."

"I think you're overreacting," said Ernie. "So what. You don't run a pet store. So some lab animals got rabies. Take them to the pound, that's all."

"Well, we can't, Ernie. You've got to take my word for it. Be a friend, for Chrissake—I wouldn't involve you in this if I didn't need to. If I had any other way out, I'd—"

"If they *are* rabid weasels, you can't just burn them alive," said Ernie, "It's too awful. At least let me kill them first." He went to the drawer in the supply cabinet and took out his Luger. "Just have your two men here carry them out to the parking lot and I'll put them out of their misery."

Burt looked nervously at Frank and Freddy, then back at Ernie. "I don't think that would work," he shrugged.

"What do you mean? Why not?"

"Ernie, can you swear to keep a secret?"

"I don't know. Depends what kind of secret."

"You have to swear or I can't tell you. But I promise I won't make you part of anything illegal."

"All right," Ernie said grudgingly. "I promise."

Burt took a deep breath. "Well, old pal, old poker buddy … it's not rabid weasels in the bags," he confessed.

Ernie stared at the struggling bags, taking a tighter grip on his Luger.

Burt went over to one of the bags and tugged loose the cord that held it shut. He pulled the plastic apart a little, revealing a hand, clenching and unclenching.

"Holy shit!" Ernie said, jumping back.

"Sorry, but this is the only way you're gonna believe me when I tell you the truth!" Burt said. And he picked up the bag and emptied its contents on to the floor in front of Ernie. A human arm, sawed off at the shoulder, fell to the floor and started writhing. The hand, separately severed, was still clenching and unclenching.

Then the hand twitched and leapt, and managed to grab Ernie's ankle. He let out a strangled scream and tried to kick the thing off. Freddy and Frank watched, too sick to move, but Burt quickly knelt and pulled the severed hand away from Ernie's leg, tearing his sock in the process.

"Yick!" said Ernie.

Burt tossed the hand and the arm back into the bag and tied the cord.

Ernie was white and shaking, leaning back against one of the embalming tables.

"Better sit down, old pal," Burt said, "I've got quite a story to tell you."

Meanwhile, Tina had come down the steps into the warehouse basement. The third step had almost made her fall; it was an old plank, partly splintered and wobbly. It had creaked and shifted under her high-heeled shoes, and she had barely managed to keep her balance. Then, more cautiously, she had descended the rest of the steps.

At the bottom she peered into near darkness, wondering why she was hearing nothing more from the croaky, injured-sounding voice. She found another light switch and flipped it on, amazed at the filth and the clutter all around her. Suddenly something moved in the shadows, behind some rusty drums. Tina stiffened. "Hello?" she called out tremuously. "Are you there? I'm here to help you."

Something started to shuffle out of the shadows. Tina squinted, trying to make it out, then she gasped—a huge intake of air that filled her entire chest cavity—and her eyes got huge and round as saucers.

Rooted by fright, she found herself staring at a horrible monstrosity. The body that was in the cracked drum had somehow reconstituted, into a black, tarry, loathesome skeleton. It spoke in a voice like vomit

—the true voice of the creature, undisguised by its former attempt to sound mortal. “Brains … brains,” it said in a lustful croak, shuffling towards Tina, raising its arms to clutch and embrace her.

She turned and ran for the stairs, dashing up them, gasping and panting in horror. On the way, she kicked off her high-heeled shoes which would only impede her effort to save her life. When she hit the third step from the top, coming down on it with all her weight, it gave way, splintering with a loud ripping noise. Tina’s leg plunged right through as the step caved in, tearing her flesh and jamming her to the hip.

The stinking black corpse started climbing towards her on all fours, muttering, “Brains … brains …”

She hung in her helpless situation, with one leg poking through the stair cavity, kicking and trying to find a purchase. She clawed at the stairs and walls, twisting to look at the monster coming after her.

“Brains!” the thing croaked.

Impelled by fear, since she couldn’t extricate herself from her trap, Tina pulled her other leg through the splinters of the broken step, then lowered her body and let herself drop through the stairwell. She landed with a thud on the concrete beneath the steps and lay there gasping and moaning, trying to pull herself upright.

The rotting, chemically mummified corpse started dragging itself back down the steps. Tina struggled to crawl away from the hideous thing, and finally she staggered to her feet, as the corpse reached for her, croaking, “Live brains!”

“Nooooo!” Tina screamed, limping deeper into the basement.

She dodged and hid among piles of dusty, grimy debris, and just when she thought she was doomed she spotted an old janitor’s closet with the door ajar. She darted into it and pulled the door shut, hoping the creature wouldn’t know she was in there. To her great relief, the door was made of steel and could be locked by depressing and turning the knob from inside. She did this just in time, a few seconds before her pursuer started tugging and twisting. Then, as she cowered in the darkness, the thing started pounding and pounding, trying to push the door in.

Tina screamed, “Freddyyyy! Freddyyyy!” desperately hoping that he had returned from the funeral home. She stood up and groped for something to defend herself with. Her hand struck a cord and she pulled it—the closet bulb came on. She looked frantically all around her, and saw nothing but an old mop, a squeegee, a wringer-bucket and some cleaning supplies.

The pounding on the door kept up, rhythmically, repetitively. *Bang.* Pause. *Bang.* Pause. *Bang.*

Sobbing with fear, Tina covered her ears with her hands.

Then, suddenly, the pounding stopped.

Not knowing whether to be relieved or more scared, Tina pulled her hands away from her ears. She darted her eyes all around in another frantic survival scan. This time she noticed that the steel door had a peephole in it. Apparently it had once been used as the front door of an office, till it had been appropriated for this basement closet. Timidly, Tina put her eye to the peephole. She caught a glimpse of the blackened corpse shuffling among piles of junk, shoving things aside, apparently on some kind of search.

With dread she realized what it must be looking for. A tool. An implement. Something that could be used to pry open the closet door and drag her out.

"Freddyyyy! Freddyyyy!" she screamed, with heightened terror.

Freddy and Frank were listening as Burt finished telling Ernie Kaltenbrunner the events that had led up to the request to use the crematorium. "So … now you know," said Burt. "What's in these plastic bags is a … a split dog all cut up, and a corpse we dismembered with a friggin' bone saw … 'cause they wouldn't stay dead like they were supposed to. *Now* will you let us cremate the damn things?"

Trying to digest the fantastic details, Ernie stared at the squirming bags. "Why me?" he said mournfully. "Why does it have to be me who's dumb enough to stick around and try to operate a class funeral home in a dying neighbourhood where I seldom get to deal with upper-crust people; *loyal* people, like Morton and Helen here?" He looked at the cadavers, then back at the squirming bags, "If I hadn't seen that dismembered hand grabbing my ankle, I never would've believed you, Burt. I'm still not sure I really saw it."

"Well, you did," said Burt. "You saw it all right. So'd me and Frank and Freddy. So get your oven fired up, will you, Ernie?"

"Yes … yes, I suppose there's no other choice. Follow me," Ernie said. "Bring those bags with you."

They went down a hallway into the crematorium. While Burt, Frank and Freddy lugged the plastic bags full of animal and human body parts into the room, Ernie turned the knobs that ignited the gas jets with a loud *thump*. Then he opened the door of the oven and pulled out a long, sliding, stainless-steel rack. "Pile all the bags on here, men," he instructed.

Burt said, "This will destroy everything, right? With nothing left over?"

“Oh, everything will go,” Ernie assured him.

“Including the bones?”

“Oh, the bones are no problem. The hardest part to burn is the heart.”

Freddy shuddered, lifting the bag containing the cadaver’s trembling torso on to the oven rack.

“The heart is tough to burn? Why?” asked Burt.

“It’s just a big, tough muscle,” said Ernie.

“Well, we don’t want any part of it surviving,” Burt said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll turn it up hotter for the heart.”

“And the split dog. That has to go, too. All of it. All of its parts; even its half of a heart.”

“All of it will go,” assured Ernie.

“So there won’t be nothing left then?” Burt nitpicked.

“Nothing but a little pile of ashes.”

“We don’t even want the ashes, Ernie.”

“Then I’ll turn it up higher and we’ll burn the ashes too.”

When Frank said, “All loaded up!” Ernie slid the stainless-steel rack into the oven with its squirmy cargo. Then he slammed the door, which had a porthole in it so the work of the flames could be viewed. Frank and Freddy hung back, too sick to look. But Bert and Ernie watched, anxious to make sure that the crematorium handled its grisly chore.

The gas jets curled up and around the flopping, struggling bags. The plastic quickly burned off, revealing the limbs and body parts of the cadaver and the split dog. The human head and the half of a dog’s head were screaming from the heat, and the other body sections were rolling and twitching like mad. The hair and fur started to singe, then the flesh itself began to sizzle, curl and blacken …

*

Black smoke poured from the chimney of the crematorium. The fat columns of black, oily smoke rose to the sky, reaching the dense, dark rain clouds that had been hovering all afternoon and evening.

When the putrid smoke mixed with the clouds, there was a blinding explosion—a veritable hydra of electricity dancing all over the ominous sky. With this burst of malignant lightning, the rain that had held back all day began to come down. For some strange reason it seemed to concentrate itself in the area of the Kaltenbrunner Funeral Home and the Resurrection Cemetery.

The rain saturated the graves, splattering on the tombstones and

monuments. The droplets pelted the blades of grass, and soaked downward into the earth.

As the moisture pounded on the turf it seemed to steam, making clinging bundles of vaporous mist … blackish yellow, earth-hugging clouds … as malignant-looking as the thick bundles of smoke pouring from the crematorium chimney.

Where this unusual rain collected in puddles—for instance, in the depressions of sunken, ancient graves—it began to corrode the earth. It began to eat its way downward, loosening and dissolving the packed soil, and soaking into the coffins beneath.

The chemical-laden water hissed as it sank through the ground and seeped through the coffins, seeking the long-dead flesh that the coffins held.

Every now and then, forks of lightning that normally might have struck tall trees or powerlines actually came down low, between the trees or other choice targets, and smashed the earth, splitting it apart, making it easier for the ugly yellow rain to reach the buried coffins …

When this rain started, Scuz, Legs, Chuck, Casey and Meat ran from the cemetery. Scuz's ghetto blaster was blaring, and Legs was pulling her clothes on as the gang stumbled and darted among the tombstones. In a blinding downpour, they groped their way to the exit, under the stone arch, and piled into Suicide's convertible. Suicide tried to start the engine, but got nothing but a grinding sound and no turn-over.

Legs said, "Hey, my skin burns."

"Me too," said Scuz.

"Turn that box off, it'll attract fuckin' lightning," said Meat.

Scuz turned off the loud music.

"My skin stings!" said Casey, "It's that rain, it's like *acid* rain or something. I saw a puddle of it that looked yellowish."

"Oh, shit!" Legs bitched, "It's all over me. A towel! Somebody give me a towel!"

"Yeah, you think you're in a hotel?" Suicide leered.

"Oh, crap! I wonder what's in that rain," said Legs.

Suicide kept grinding the ignition till he couldn't get a peep out of the battery. Then he said, "Fuck it, this car ain't goin' *nowhere."*

"Hey, by the way," said Meat, "where the hell's Tina? I ain't seen her since back in the cemetery."

"She musta split. Cut out on us. That wench's head is screwed up," said Suicide.

“She went looking for Freddy,” said Chuck, “and she found him.”

“How the hell do *you* know?” Scuz jeered.

“Because I tailed her for a little way when she tried to sneak off on us. Freddy was down by that funeral home, unloading a van with UNEEDA MEDICAL SUPPLY on it. Tina went and met him, and he musta given her a key to the warehouse to go in and wait for him, ’cause I saw her open the door and go in. The Uneeda van’s still parked down there by the funeral home. See it?”

“Yeah … yeah,” said Suicide, using his hand to wipe mist from the windscreen so he could peer through the battering rain.

“Hey, do you guys hear something?” Casey piped up all of a sudden.

“Hear what?” said Meat.

“I don’t know. Something. Like maybe wind howling … only stranger and weirder.”

They all fell silent and listened as hard as they could.

“It’s coming from the cemetery!” Meat yelled. “Wind down the window, Suicide!”

“Shit! We’ll get drenched again!” Legs complained.

But Suicide and Scuz both wound down the windows on their side of the car, which was the side nearest the cemetery. It was hard to hear anything distinctly above the noise of the pelting rain, but they all thought they heard distant, muffled moaning. The sound seemed to come from somewhere deep, like below the ground … soft … almost too muted to hear. Then there were some clawing and scratching sounds … and something that sounded like nails or boards being pried loose.

“The fucking corpses are coming up out of their graves!” Suicide joked, letting out a mad giggle.

But nobody else laughed. They were too worried that the strange sounds they were hearing were indicative of exactly what Suicide had put into words.

“Wind the windows up!” Legs cried. “That shittin’ rain *stings!”*

“I can’t keep dry anyway,” said Casey. “There’s a leak in the roof right above my head.”

“I gotta get out of here,” said Chuck, with claustrophobic ferocity. “Let’s go over to the warehouse and see if Tina will let us in so we can wait out the storm.”

“If she’s there, she *better* let us in,” said Suicide. “All this is her fuckin’ boyfriend’s fault. If that queeb Freddy never got such a dopey job—”

“Fuckin’ A,” said Scuz. “If it wasn’t for *him* we wouldn’t *be* here.”

"Damn right," said Suicide.

The whole gang piled out of the convertible and dashed across the street through the downpour, their shoes splashing in deep puddles of yellowish water …

Meanwhile, Tina's situation had gone from bad to worse. Locked in the basement closet, she had watched the rotting, corpse-like creature shuffling around in the shadows, hunting through the junk and the rubble. Sometimes she couldn't see him at all, and sometimes she could see only parts of him because he was outside the periphery of the peephole. For a while she had dared to hope that she might remain safe … She couldn't imagine what he might find that would enable him to get at her.

But then he came shuffling towards her, and she caught a glimpse of something frightening in his hand—an old rusty crowbar. She screamed as his foul, stinking black shape loomed closer, blotting out her view through the peephole. She heard the crowbar being wedged between the door and the jamb, and with a creaking, prying noise, the jamb started to bend. In a matter of moments the tongue of the lock was going to be popped loose.

Thinking to herself how true it was that there were no agnostics in foxholes, Tina started to mumble an Act of Contrition.

While Tina was praying, Chuck, Casey, Meat, Scuz, Legs and Suicide came pounding up the front steps of the warehouse main entrance. Without bothering to ring the bell, Meat twisted the doorknob and was surprised when the door came open. The gang immediately rushed inside, brushing rain off themselves.

Legs said, "My skin really burns! Ouch! Ouch!"

"Well, if you'd take a bath once in a while," Casey joked.

Chuck shouted, "Hey, *Tina!* Are you *in* here?"

Tina's voice came back in reply, a distant shout:

"Yesss! Here! Help me! I'm in the cellar! Oh, Goddd!"

Because she sounded so desperate, the whole gang broke into a run, towards the sound of her voice, towards the basement door. They were all yelling at once as they ran.

"Is that Tina?" said Meat.

"What's she yelling about?" said Casey.

"Where the fuck is she?" Meat wondered.

"Through that door!" said Scuz. "Watch out! There's a broken step!"

Suicide pushed Scuz out of the way and took the lead. He and

everybody else charged down the basement stairs after stepping gingerly past the place where there was a splintered gap. They hit the bottom of the steps in time to see the blackened figure of a corpse prying open the door of the closet where Tina was cowering. As the door banged open, Suicide yelled, “What the *fuck!*”

The rotting chemical mummy turned its head and looked at Suicide. He and his friends stared, not sure what they were seeing—some kind of dirty, filthy, horrible, rotten …

Tina took advantage of the moment when they were all frozen to *run* for her life out of the closet. When the mummy turned to grab her, she was gone, darting and banging into junk, boxes and barrels.

As a second choice, the mummy came after Suicide, croaking its favourite word: *“Brains!”*

Suicide was so terrified his legs went wobbly, and he slipped in a greasy puddle while the rest of the gang backed away. When he scrambled and slid on the slippery concrete floor, the stinking corpse grabbed him by his ears, yanked his head up, and bit into the top of his stubbly shaved head, like eating a melon without slicing it first, or an egg in the shell. *Crack!* The chemical mummy had powerful jaws even though it seemed to be half rotten and dead. Suicide screamed horribly but briefly, and his whole body twitched, his arms and legs jerking spastically in a death reflex due to having a piece bitten out of his brain.

Chuck, Casey, Meat, Scuz and Legs stared in mind-popping horror at what was taking place in front of them. Tina screamed and circled behind them, running past them and up the stairs. They were left looking on stupidly as the monster took another bite out of Suicide’s skull. *Chomp!*

“Sheeeit!” said Meat. He picked up a block of dirty wood and hurled it at the corpse, hitting its shoulder, and succeeding in drawing its attention. It looked up at Meat and the rest of his pals. *“More* brains!” the monster croaked, sounding stronger than before it had made a meal of Suicide.

Meat and the gang bolted for the stairs. They leapt and stumbled en masse, scrambling across and over the gapped-out step. The last one out of the basement, Meat, turned and slammed the door shut. “Help me!” he screamed. “Bar this door! Don’t run away! You fuckers!”

While Tina was fighting for her life and Suicide’s brains were being devoured, Freddy was feeling sicker than ever in his stomach and his head. He watched Ernie Kaltenbrunner open the door to the crematorium oven and jab around inside with a poker while Burt

Wilson peered anxiously over his shoulder.

“Is the heart gone?” Burt asked.

“Yep. All burnt up,” said Ernie, leaning his poker against the oven and slamming the door.

“Are you sure?” Burt pressed.

“It’s all gone. Right up the chimney.”

“Thank God that’s over,” said Burt, visibly relaxing. “I never had such a weight lifted from my shoulders, thanks to you, Ernie. Don’t forget now, you’re invited to my barbecue tomorrow. Think you can make it?”

“It depends, Burt. I’ll try, but I might be too pooped. I still have to get Mr. and Mrs. Dowden looking pretty for their debut Thursday morning.”

“Well, I’m not gonna forget I owe you a big one,” said Burt. Then he looked over at Frank and Freddy. They were sitting side by side, slumped on a little bench on the far side of the crematorium, both looking extremely ill. “Hey! What’s wrong with you two guys?” Burt blurted. “Cheer up! The worst is over with!”

“I feel like shit,” said Freddy, “I’m really sick.”

“Me, too,” said Frank. “I feel sick, too.”

Burt squatted in front of Freddy and Frank. “Sick how?”

Freddy said, “I’ve got a headache that would kill a horse, and I just want to puke. I’m so weak I can hardly move.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Frank. “But I’m cold on top of it. I’ve got a terrible chill.” He shivered violently, hugging his arms tight to his body, “It’s that stuff. We breathed that stuff.”

“What stuff?” said Burt.

“What are they talking about?” said Ernie, coming over to have a look at the two greenish-looking men on the crematorium bench.

“When the drum cracked,” said Freddy, “this gas squirted out. It hit us right in the face, and I know we breathed it. It knocked us out. We were out cold for a while.”

“Christ!” said Burt.

“We told you about it before,” said Frank. “This ain’t the first time you’re hearin’ about it.”

“I know, I know,” said Burt, pacing nervously once again. “I didn’t think the effects were still on you, that’s all.”

Burt and Ernie both found themselves edging uneasily back a few steps, away from Frank and Freddy.

“Man, we’d better get to a doctor,” Freddy moaned.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Frank agreed, holding his stomach.

Burt said, “You guys can use the company van, drive to the emergency room.”

Suddenly, Frank stumbled to his feet and ran down the hall to the embalming room. He rushed through it, flinging open the door. He stuck his head out into the rain and vomited, thunder, lightning and wind raging all around him. No sooner did he come back in than Freddy stumbled out and vomited, too. Burt and Ernie hung back, watching fretfully.

Frank wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his grey Uneeda workshirt. “Gotta call my wife,” he mumbled. “Gotta tell her I’m goin’ to the hospital.”

“Me, too,” said Freddy. “Gotta let Tina know where I’m at. Maybe you guys can tell her.”

Ernie spoke up firmly. “Listen, you two guys can’t go running around in this storm. You’re too sick. You’re in no condition to drive. I’ll call an ambulance.”

“Get paramedics,” said Frank.

“Why don’t you two guys sit down over there?” Burt suggested, pointing to a couple of folding chairs against a far wall, parallel to the embalming tables which still held the nude corpses of Morton and Helen Dowden. This would put the corpses between Burt and his two sick employees, who repulsed him more than the corpses did, since he didn’t understand the disease they had and feared it might be contagious.

Ernie grabbed a wall phone and dialled. “Can I have the number of the city paramedics? Fire Department? What’s that number?” He wrote on a scratch pad, then hung up and dialled again. “Hello … yes … can we get some paramedics over here?” He listened, then gave the address of the funeral home. “Tell the paramedics to come around to the side door to the embalming room. We’ve got two men poisoned here. We don’t know what kind of poison … no, it wasn’t embalming fluid—it didn’t *happen* here. Tell the paramedics to hurry, okay?” He hung up.

“They’re on their way?” asked Burt.

“Yep, they’re supposed to be,” said Ernie.

Frank and Freddy were both doubled up, side by side on the folding chairs, holding their heads and moaning.

12

After the gang ran up the basement stairs chased by the chemical mummy, Tina was the first one to come back and help Meat barricade the door. She acted not out of bravery but out of fear. His yells for help had stopped her impulse to flee by making her hope that if that horrid thing could be kept in the basement she would be safe from it at last.

Unfortunately, the basement door could not be locked without a key. Meat was struggling, pushing with all his might to stop the monster from coming through, but the knob was twisting and jerking and the door was coming away from the jamb, clutched by fingers of blackened, shrivelled flesh. Tina spied a big fire axe leaning in a corner and chopped at the fingers, hacking and slashing till several of them fell off, writhing and squirming on the floor. *Squirming on the floor!* Even as she chopped and fought, Tina's shook-up brain made the connection—Freddy was dealing with *squirmy things,* too, back at the funeral parlour.

Losing its fingers did not stop the monster from trying to come through. It kept pushing, and it was all Meat and Tina could do to shove the door shut again. "Help us, you chicken-shit bastards!" Meat yelled.

Scuz, Chuck, Casey and Legs finally started contributing to the fight for survival. They shoved a heavy packing crate in front of the door, and Meat and Tina helped slide it firmly into place; in replacing their own bodies with the crate, the door came open a few inches, and once again Tina had to chop at the monster with the fire axe till it retreated enough to bang the door shut and wedge the packing crate solidly against it.

"Nails!" Meat yelled. "Casey and Legs! Find nails!"

While Scuz, Chuck, Meat and Tina used their combined weight and strength against the door and the crate, Legs and Casey went scurrying through the warehouse, down the aisles and corridors of supply-laden shelves. They found a hammer and nails beside a packing crate in which a human skeleton was lying, packed in excelsior. While the rest of the gang pushed against the basement door and the packing crate barricade, Meat drove nails right through the boards of the crate and into the wall so the door could not be opened again even though the mummy kept pounding on it and croaking, "Brains! *Brains!*"

After a while, the gang all felt safe enough to stop shoving so hard,

and then to move back from the barricade. They were all out of breath, frightened and dishevelled.

“Oh, God … Oh, God … What *was* that hideous, horrible thing?” Legs babbled.

“What the fuck are we gonna do?” said Meat.

“Suicide is *down* there,” Chuck moaned.

“He’s gone, man,” said Scuz. “It ate his head.” He thought for a moment, and scowled angrily. “Hey, my box, man! My box is down there, too! That goddamn monster got my box!”

“Maybe it digs music,” said Meat.

“Shit, somebody better come and kill that thing so I can get my music box back,” Scuz whined.

Meat said, “I don’t hear nothing down there.”

“My box was turned *off,* man,” said Scuz. “I turned it off back in the car.”

“I’m not talkin’ about your fuckin’ box!” Meat snapped. “I mean I don’t hear the monster any more, you dumb shit!”

“Maybe it went back down the stairs,” said Tina.

“Maybe there’s another way *up* here!” Casey said, panic-stricken.

“Let’s get outta here,” said Chuck. He turned to Tina. “Where’s Freddy? Still at the funeral parlour? I saw you rapping with him over there.”

Tina nodded slowly. She didn’t say what was on her mind, but she was terribly worried for Freddy—scared that he was dealing with something similar to the tarry mummy that had devoured Suicide.

Meat said, “All right, listen. We’ll go over to that funeral home and find Freddy, and then we’ll call somebody from there.”

“I don’t wanna call no cops,” said Scuz. “The cops are just gonna blame us for everything and kick our asses.”

Chuck said, “Hey, get fucked, Scuz, with your cop paranoia! We’re in deep shit here!”

Tina said, “Let’s go, let’s go!” Suddenly she *had* to get to where Freddy was, to make sure he was okay. She touched the top of her head; it was bare. At some point during the struggle she had lost Freddy’s red baseball cap, and the loss seemed like a bad omen. It was probably down in the basement with the monster, along with Scuz’s ghetto blaster and Suicide’s dead body.

“Back out in that hideous rain again,” Legs complained. “And my skin is already stinging all over.”

“Can it! Let’s move out!” said Meat.

But just as the gang burst out of the front door of the warehouse,

the entire sky erupted in forked tongues of angry lightning, and with a loud *crack* a telephone pole was struck and crashed down, ripping powerlines and dragging them into the rain-drenched street. “Holy *fuck!”* Meat yelled. He and the rest of the gang froze, awed by a tremendous electrical display caused by live cables whipping and sparking, turning puddles into stinking clouds of yellow vapour. The street was impassable. The telephone pole had fallen diagonally across it, smashing down some heavy tree branches in its path and adding them to the mess of electrified debris. “How the hell we gonna get to the funeral parlour *now?”* Scuz cried.

“Cut through the cemetery!” Meat shouted. He led the way, skirting the damage caused by the lightning bolt, running past Suicide’s convertible and under the stone archway. The rain kept coming down in sheets. The wind blew it in gusts. Lightning flashed and exploded. When Meat glimpsed what was lit up by the lightning, he stopped in his tracks, and everybody else stopped with him.

The graveyard was running with *mud*—slippery, slimy, horrible mud. And it was as if the mud had been bulldozed, overturned. Gravestones and monuments were tilted and knocked over. Instead of an even surface of drenched grass, the cemetery resembled a field that had been madly plowed and excavated by a maniac, and then deluged with water.

Meat and the gang huddled under the overhanging eaves of a large stone mausoleum whose roof and walls had been split and cracked open. They were stranded by the lake of mud. “Holy shit,” Meat said. “We’re gonna have to *swim* to get through there.”

Suddenly, out of the darkness and the rain came a horrible moaning sound. It was like the sound of mass hunger—a chorus of ravenous moans. Meat and the gang wheeled around, facing the direction they had come from. Lightning lit up the cemetery, and ten feet in front of them the gang saw a pair of rotted hands clawing their way out of the liquid mud. That sight was horrible enough, but what was beyond the hands was even more horrible. A group of rotted corpses—about a dozen of them—were shuffling across the graveyard, wading in the slime, *groaning* hungrily. “Brains! *Brains!”* some of them rasped, like the mummy in the warehouse basement.

The rotted hands continued to claw till a corpse’s head popped up out of the mud. Filling its lungs with air, the half-submerged corpse let out a terrible howl of agony.

“We gotta make a break for it,” Meat said in a tight, fear-ridden voice. “Run … split up … whatever it takes … we gotta save our asses.”

Even as they stood there with little hope of surviving the onslaught

of the hungry corpses, their situation was getting worse. Other groups of ghouls were approaching them from other parts of the cemetery, drawn by their lust for living flesh.

"I'm cuttin' out, man!" Scuz yelled. He took off running, oblivious to the ooze and the water he had to splash through … and abandoning his girlfriend Legs, who tried desperately to catch up with him. She slipped and fell sideways, and the corpse halfway out of its grave made a lunge at her, grabbing her by the ankle. She screamed and squirmed, slipping and sliding, unable to gain any traction, as the moaning corpse pulled her down in the slime.

Because of the darkness and the blinding rain, none of her friends saw what had happened to her. They were all fleeing for their lives, trying to avoid the deepest, sludgiest mud that would suck them down like quicksand. In their effort to escape, they had two advantages that they didn't know about. One was that the corpses moved slowly, not having full, efficient use of their limbs because of their dead, rotted muscles and ligaments. The second advantage was that the army of ghouls was partially diverted by Legs, the prey who had already been caught. They advanced upon her as she struggled and screamed, while the rest of the gang plunged headlong through the swampy, uprooted graveyard.

The half-submerged corpse clung to her legs while the others shuffled and crawled towards her, surrounding her. Dozens of hands reached for her in the driving rain—rotting, melting arms, grabbing her, pushing her head down deep in the sea of mud, drowning her screams …

13

The paramedics who were dispatched to Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home had been playing cards at the station, hoping to get through the rest of the evening without making any more runs except the kind that count in scoring for gin rummy. But they knew that since this was the start of an exceptionally long Fourth of July weekend, it'd be a miracle if nobody else on their beat got maimed, lacerated, bludgeoned, shot, or hit by a heart attack. Then they had received the call about two guys being poisoned, and had set out on their ninth run of the day, which at least was not run-of-the-mill.

Don Berchok and Stan Feldstein, the two paramedics, sped to the scene of the poisoning call in their long white ambulance, lights flashing and siren wailing through a heavy downpour. Both men were in their early thirties, both Vietnam veterans, having received their medical emergency training in the U.S. army. Both had had men die in their arms, horribly wounded. After trying to patch together soldiers who were ripped to shreds by land mines, grenades and mortars, they might be expected to have a certain blasé attitude about the lesser forms of civilian tragedy. Both affected such an attitude, but neither really felt it, and neither would admit it to the other. So they each thought they were the only one with a secret soft spot.

Don Berchok, driving the ambulance on this run, was an abuser of alcohol and amphetamines. His pretty wife had left him because of it, taking custody of their two children. He wasn't entirely sure why he was hung up on booze and pills; the drugs never completely staved off his battlefield nightmares and his feeling of being a failure as a civilian. Before going to Nam he had studied acting; had illusions of becoming a movie star. Sometimes when he didn't get stoned for a while, he was still almost handsome—especially if he wore a hat so his hair loss didn't show. But when he was on a binge, he looked like a fading has-been, sallow and sunken and washed out, twenty years older than his real age. Sometimes he thought it was his job; his job was destroying him. It turned out to be harder for him to look at dead babies and pretty women all cut up in domestic settings that were supposed to be peaceful than to deal with the ugly casualties of war that at least were to be expected.

Stan Feldstein, Berchok's partner, was disturbed by exactly the same paradox. But, whereas Berchok had confided his feelings to nobody, Feldstein had confessed his to his fiancée. She had understood and

consoled him, and had encouraged him in his ambition to go back to college and stop driving an ambulance as soon as possible. Feldstein was studying for a degree in education. When he finished his student teaching next January, he was going to get married and start working as a biology teacher in the Louisville school system.

As Berchok wheeled the ambulance around the corner into the block where Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home was, he saw the powerlines down up the street and the sparks flashing in the heavy rain. The street lamps and house lights up there were out, but Kaltenbrunner's end of the block still had electrical service. The funeral home had lights on, inside and outside, as the ambulance pulled into the lot.

Not bothering to pull ponchos on over their white uniforms, Berchok and Feldstein jumped out of their vehicle, leaving the lights flashing. They ran to the side door and rang the night bell. A guy in a yellow wind-breaker and a floppy golfer's hat let them in, and they brushed rain off of themselves, noticing how the rain in this part of town seemed to sting their faces and arms.

"You're the paramedics?" Burt Wilson asked, pushing his heavy black-framed glasses up his nose. He peered at the red crosses on the white boxes they were carrying.

"We ain't Santa and his reindeer," said Berchok, glancing around. "Are you the fellow who called us?"

"No, I'm Burt Wilson. Ernie Kaltenbrunner placed the emergency call. He owns this place. He's busy with a couple of his … uh … clients."

"Who took the poison?" Berchok asked.

"Those guys over there," said Burt, pointing.

Frank and Freddy were sitting side by side in the folding chairs against the wall parallel to the embalming tables, which were now empty of their former cargo. Berchok and Feldstein came over and looked at the two poisoned men, who were wrapped in blankets, shivering. The blankets of pale blue satin looked suspiciously like the kind used in coffins, and Berchok and Feldstein guessed that they had been provided by the funeral director and were probably all that he had on hand. Frank and Freddy had grey, greasy complexions with purple circles under their yellow, bloodshot eyes.

"What did you guys take?" Feldstein asked.

Frank and Freddy moved their mouths a little, but neither answered right away. It was like they were too weak to think or talk.

Burt Wilson answered for them, "It was some kind of industrial chemical. Something in a drum."

“What drum? Where?” barked Berchok.

“Uh … we’re not sure,” Burt stammered.

“Can you find out?” Feldstein asked. “Your friends’ lives may depend upon it.”

“How do you expect us to help them if we don’t even know what they took?” Berchok complained.

“Uh … I can make some phone calls,” Burt hedged. “But not before morning.”

Shrugging resignedly, Feldstein knelt and opened the lid of his medical emergency kit. “Let’s take some vital signs,” he suggested to Berchok. “Try to get some idea of what we may be dealing with here.”

The paramedics put digital readout thermometers in Frank and Freddy’s mouths. Berchok wrapped a blood-pressure cuff around Frank’s arm, while Feldstein took Freddy’s pulse. The medics were immediately puzzled by the readings they were getting. They fumbled with various instruments, shaking them, trying them, trying them again.

Berchok swore. “Damn! Can I borrow your stethoscope, Stan?”

“What’s wrong?” said Feldstein.

“Taxpayers pay good money to outfit you guys and you come here with faulty equipment,” Burt Wilson muttered.

Berchok shot Burt a mean look, but ignored him and spoke to Feldstein. “I can’t hear anything,” he said, moving the stethoscope all around Freddy’s chest.

“Are you sure it’s the stethoscope?” asked Feldstein.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t hear a pulse through this one either.”

“What the hell is going on here?” said Berchok. “Are we going crazy? Let’s switch patients.”

Frank and Freddy stayed slumped in a sort of stupor, their skin greyer and their eyes yellower and more bloodshot than before. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?” Freddy said in a weak, hoarse whisper.

“Dear God, help me get better,” Frank croaked. He tried to make the sign of the cross but couldn’t lift his arm.

Berchok and Feldstein kept moving around, trying different things with their equipment.

“No blood pressure,” said Feldstein.

“No pulse,” said Berchok.

Freddy croaked, “What do you mean, ‘no blood pressure, no pulse’?”

“Yeah,” Frank rasped.

"Shhh," Feldstein cautioned. He was trying to hear *anything,* even something *weak,* through his stethoscope. He and Berchok bent over their instruments in silent concentration.

Frank and Freddy stared at the medics with growing horror.

Suddenly one of the thermometers beeped, then the other. The paramedics took them out of their patients' mouths and held them up to look at them. Berchok and Feldstein turned and saw disbelieving expressions on each other's faces.

"Are you sure you guys know what you're doing?" Burt Wilson said indignantly.

"Shut up!" Berchok snapped at him. Then to Feldstein he said, "What reading do *you* have?"

"Seventy," said Feldstein, shaking his head in befuddlement.

"Seventy what?" Freddy croaked. The confusion was making him scared, and he was beginning to suspect both paramedics of incompetence.

"Seventy degrees," said Feldstein.

"What's that?" Frank piped up weakly.

"Room temperature," Feldstein explained.

"Yeah, that's all *I'm* getting—seventy," said Berchok. "It can't be the equipment. It wouldn't *all* go bad at once."

"Something really goofy is happening here," said Feldstein. "You don't suppose some kind of new disease … like AIDS maybe?"

"What? What are you guys saying?" Freddy said in his weak, hoarse whisper.

But the paramedics ignored him. They backed off a few paces and discussed the situation in hushed tones …

Meanwhile, Ernie Kaltenbrunner was admiring the fine job he had done on Morton and Helen Dowden, who were laid out in matching bronze caskets, side by side, in one of the large "slumber parlours" on the main floor of the funeral home. Morton was in a black tuxedo, and Helen was wearing a lovely blue gown with matching blue evening gloves. Their silver-white heads of hair were beautifully coiffed and combed. Their faces were tan and healthy-looking, turned slightly to face the visitors expected on Thursday.

Ernie had cosmetized the cuts on Morton's face, using Dermawax and blending it in with suntan flesh dusting powder applied with a fine-bristled brush. He had put a touch of rouge on the cheeks to contribute to the appearance of good health. He had glued down the eyelids because they had kept peeping open, apparently not

adequately secured by the ridged plastic eyecaps inserted underneath.

He was particularly proud of the job he had done on Helen's nose; it looked exactly like the original, blended perfectly into her own flesh with the same suntan dusting powder Ernie had used on her husband. He had also used rouge and ruby lip gloss to emphasize her serene, mature beauty. Since her gown was rather low cut, he had had more work to do, making the flesh of her arms, shoulders and neck the same shade as her face.

Wishing to see the Dowdens exactly as they would appear to their visitors on Thursday, he turned on the rose-coloured spotlights above the caskets. Then he noticed a fleck of lint on Helen's right eyelash. Just as he picked it off, he heard a loud hammering on the front doors, so loud he was afraid the glass would shatter. Drawing his Luger from under his belt, he headed for the foyer.

The lobby was dark as Ernie came through it, his gun raised. The loud hammering on the glass kept up. He saw silhouetted figures, banging and screaming. He ducked behind an armchair, training his gun on the figures on the other side of the glass. With his free hand, he reached over and turned on the outside porch light.

He saw some weird, water-soaked creatures—Tina, Meat and Scuz. They terrified him—especially the one all in green with green Mohawk hair. The black one wasn't any beauty either, with his long dreadlocks flying as he jumped up and down. The girl looked like a chippy in her red plastic miniskirt with her long black hair plastered to her face in dishevelled strands. She yelled, "Please help us, mister! We're being chased! Oh, God—*please!"*

"Stop banging on that glass or I'll shoot!" Ernie yelled.

"Please! I'm Freddy's girlfriend!" the girl cried, "Is he still here?"

"What's your name?" Ernie challenged, pointing the Luger. The trio on the porch had stopped pounding and yelling, but they kept glancing around as if they expected to be pounced on from behind.

"Tina—my name is Tina," said the girl. "Let us in!"

It checked. Ernie remembered Freddy mentioning the girl named Tina who had come up to him earlier, just as he and Frank had finished unloading the van. Cautiously, he emerged from behind the chair and crept towards the front door. Keeping his Luger at the ready, he said, "All right. Come in. But if you make one funny move you're all dead."

Warily, with their hands up, Meat and Tina and Scuz edged into the lobby. Meat said, "Don't shoot us, man. *We* ain't the danger. It's what's after us."

"Are you crazy?" Ernie said. "Are you on drugs?"

"You've gotta lock all the doors!" Scuz blurted. "And the windows! And call the cops! They're out there!"

"What?" said Ernie. *"Who?* Who's out there?"

Tina grabbed Ernie by the arm, too scared to care about his gun. "Do you hear that?" she asked him with a wild look in her eyes.

"Hear *what?"* scoffed Ernie. "I don't hear a darn thing but rain and thunder."

"Shut up and listen, man!" said Scuz.

They all quietened down. The rain was loud, but behind it could be heard a faint but chilling *screeching* and *moaning* sound—a babble of eerie and anguished voices.

"What *is* that?" cried Ernie, starting to become a believer at last.

"It's monsters screaming," said Meat. *"Hungry* monsters."

"What? What? Monsters, you say?" Ernie tried to think if there might be some connection between what he seemed to be hearing out there and the creepy, crawly cadaver parts he had recently cremated.

"They all came up out of the ground," Tina said in a hushed, incredulous voice, "and they came after us … maybe a hundred of them …"

"Out of the ground?" said Ernie.

"They came after us in the cemetery," said Tina. "We had to run from them … and they must've killed Legs … because she didn't make it back to the warehouse with the rest of us. Then me and Scuz and Meat … we decided to try and still make it … to get to Freddy … we had to circle here through the alleys and the side streets …"

"Jesus!" said Ernie. If what he was hearing was true, then it must be happening all over. Hundreds of corpses might be coming to life.

"Where's Freddy?" Tina pleaded. "Take me to him. Is he okay?"

When Don Berchok and Stan Feldstein finished huddling and discussing the two strange cases that confronted them, they performed a couple more tests, just to see if they could obtain *any* response that was near normal. Berchok tapped Freddy's knee with a rubber hammer. No reflex. He tapped Frank's knee and got no reflex there either. Meantime, Feldstein shined a tiny light into Freddy's pupils. He shook his head in consternation. Berchok shined a light into Frank's eyes. He shook his head, too. Both paramedics shut their lights off. They shrugged at each other, then faced their patients.

Berchok said, "You have no pulse, your blood pressure is zero over zero, you have no pupillary response, no reflexes, and your temperature is seventy degrees."

In a horrified croak, Freddy said, “What does all that mean?”

“Are we gonna be okay?” Frank hissed. “My wife, she’s holdin’ supper for me, I—”

“Well,” said Berchok, “if we’re to go by the responses we’re getting, my partner and I would have to conclude that, technically speaking, you’re not alive. Except you’re conscious. So we don’t know what it means except we obviously have to get you to a hospital.”

“You say we’re *dead?”* Freddy croaked.

“Wait a minute,” said Feldstein. “Let’s not get carried away here. We haven’t made any diagnosis. We’ve never seen any cases like yours.”

“Obviously I didn’t mean you were dead,” said Berchok. “Dead people don’t move around and talk. It would probably help immensely if we knew what kind of poison you think you took. Be that as it may, we’re going to get a couple of stretchers and radio in to the hospital. Hang in there. We’ll be back in a jiffy.”

The two medics trotted to the door and threw it open. Ignoring the wind and rain that whipped into their faces, they trotted out.

Frank and Freddy stared at each other in fear. When they saw each other’s grey skin and yellowish bloodshot eyes, it increased their feeling of panic.

Burt Wilson came over and looked at them, keeping a safe distance. “Best thing is to get you guys to a hospital,” he said, wanting to be rid of them. “They’ll run tests, find out what’s in your bloodstream. Listen … I don’t think you guys really have to tell them it happened over at the warehouse. *Where* it happened is not germane, know what I mean?”

Just then, Burt heard Ernie Kaltenbrunner calling him from somewhere in the upstairs of the funeral home:

“Burt! Can you come up here for a minute?”

“Where are you, Ernie?” Burt yelled back.

“Up in the lobby! Come up here alone! Will you, please?”

“You guys just stay here and take it easy,” Burt said to Frank and Freddy. “Wait for the stretchers. You’ll see, you’re gonna come through this just fine.” He pivoted and skippped up the steps to the lobby, where he was startled to see Ernie holding his Luger on three hideous-looking punks, one of whom turned out to be Freddy’s girlfriend Tina. But she looked so scared and muddy and half drowned that Burt almost didn’t recognize her.

“I didn’t want to barge in with this ugly-looking crew if the paramedics are still around,” said Ernie. “This one here claims to be Freddy’s girlfriend. Is she?”

"Yeah," said Burt. "What's going on here?"

Ernie said, "Burt, we got a problem."

"What do you mean?"

Meat started ranting and raving. "Mister, that graveyard out there is full of people that are coming up out of the ground. They were chasing us. They killed one of us. They eat human brains. They—"

"Suicide got it!" said Scuz. "Took his skull off … Bit right through the top like it was an eggshell."

"W-what?" Burt stammered.

"Out of the ground!" said Tina. "They're horrible, and they scream and somebody's got to *do* something!"

"Mister, they're sure as hell out there," said Meat, "and there's one of them over in that warehouse, and they've been eating people."

"In the w-warehouse?" Burt said, flabbergasted, wondering if his heartaches were ever going to end.

"That medical supply house," said Tina. "Uneeda Medical Supply. You're the boss of it, aren't you? Where my boyfriend Freddy works. Is he safe?"

Burt leaned back against a wall, feeling weak. Putting his hands over his mouth, he mumbled, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God."

"I think things are out of hand, Burt," said Ernie.

"Mister, there's a *hundred* of those things out there," said Meat.

"Freddy … is he safe?" asked Tina. "Will someone take me to him now?"

Don Berchok and Stan Feldstein were dashing through the rain to their ambulance when they heard a chorus of moans and saw a group of shadowy figures coming towards them out of the darkness, into the fuzzy, misted lights of the parking lot. They stopped and stared, getting drenched by the yellowish rain, trying to see if there were other hurt people who needed their help. When the shuffling figures came closer and their features became discernible, Berchok cried out, "Christ, Stan! Those people look worse than the two guys we just examined!"

"Maybe it's an epidemic," said Feldstein. "Some kind of weird disease unleashed here."

The people risen from the graveyard came closer, moaning and screaming, and in a flash of lightning Berchok and Feldstein saw rotting clothes and dead, decaying flesh.

"They're *rotting!"* cried Berchok. "Leprosy! We're dealing with an epidemic of *leprosy,* Stan!"

“Must be an especially virulent strain of it,” said Feldstein, his mouth gaping open. “You and I might already be infected, Don.”

“Let’s get out of here!” Berchok cried. “This is too big for us to handle on our own!”

“But we promised to take those two guys to the hospital,” said Feldstein. “We can’t just run out on them—they’re depending on us.”

“But there’s too many *more* of them now!”

Berchok ran for the ambulance, but Feldstein didn’t move. He was torn between his sense of duty and his urge to cut and run.

The decayed people were coming closer, and there were more of them, approaching from all directions, hemming in the two paramedics, surrounding them and their ambulance.

His hand on the door handle, Berchok yelled, “Come on, Stan! This is no time to be a fucking hero! You can’t play Florence Nightingale to all these lepers!”

“Brains! *Brains!”* the surrounding mob began chanting.

Berchok yanked on the door handle, only to realize it was locked—he had pushed the button down out of habit before slamming the door when he parked. He dug in his pocket for the keys, got them out, and then, from behind, one of the screaming, chanting “sick people” leapt upon him, getting him in a choke-hold.

What kind of lepers *were* these? Feldstein thought, seeing his partner being attacked. He ran over to help out, just as Berchok used some of his army judo training to flip his fiendish attacker over his head. But three more ghouls were immediately upon him, wrestling him to the pavement in the driving rain, sinking their teeth into his face and neck.

Berchok screamed, *“Stan!* Help me! *Help* me!” He kept on punching and kicking as more of the attackers swarmed upon him. “Ugh!—You—filthy—stinking—bastards!” he grunted, punctuating each word with a punch or a kick.

When Feldstein joined the fight, more of the ghouls moved in on him. They ripped and clawed at him, wailing, “Brains! Brains!” hissing their foul, putrid breath into his face. Up close, he could see that some of them were skeletal, lumbering hulks—mere frameworks of bone barely held together by rotted sinew and blackened strands of skin. Others were trailing oozing strings of intestine as they shuffled around him, clawing and reaching for his throat.

One of the ghouls chewing on Berchok’s throat bit his jugular vein in two, and his bright red blood sprayed out in huge, pumping spurts. At the same time, two ghouls seized heavy landscaping bricks and bashed in Berchok’s skull. While he was still thrashing in his death

throes, his attackers jostled and slashed at each other in a frenzy to start devouring his brain. Others drank his blood or chewed various parts of his body in an effort to quell their basic, dominant hunger for grey matter.

"Oh my God! Don!" Feldstein cried, jolted by the shock of seeing that his partner was done for. Up till then, unable to comprehend the true nature of the threat, his sense of desperation had been muted, his aggressiveness subdued, by an overwhelming miasma of disbelief. Why were these lepers or whatever they were attacking people who were well? Belatedly, when he was just about to be tackled and swarmed under, Stan Feldstein decided that the best defence was a good offence. His largest and closest attacker was a big beer-bellied man in a brown suit, totally caked with mud, but not as rotten and decayed as most of his cronies. Just as the big man reached towards him with a leering ravenous smile, Feldstein unleashed a terrific karate kick, knocking the lumbering hulk to the pavement. Having momentarily created a gap in the wailing, chanting mob of fiendish, decaying faces, Feldstein plunged through, and dived when he spotted the ambulance keys glittering where Berchok had dropped them. He scooped up the keys and scrambled away from the ghouls who nearly grabbed him.

Since the driver's side of the ambulance was blocked by ghouls devouring Berchok's body, Feldstein jinked and darted for the passenger side, punching, judo chopping, and karate kicking wailing, chanting rot-faced attackers out of his way. When it looked like curtains for him, he dived and rolled over the hood, thudding to the pavement and bouncing up into a fighting stance. Two ghouls were clawing at him, ripping open his soaking-wet uniform, when he managed to get the key in the slot. Dancing through his mind in a mad, disjointed blur were visions of making it into the ambulance, slamming the door, locking it, starting the engine and gunning the vehicle right through the onslaught, peeling across the lot towards safety and police help and a chance of earning his teaching certificate and marrying the woman he loved. He flung the door open, smacking it into one of his attackers. Then a brick cracked into the side of his head and, losing consciousness, in a dimming nightmare of wind and rain and ghastly, hungry faces he sagged, knees buckling, hitting the concrete.

Mercifully, he was out cold when he was swarmed under. He never felt the sharp teeth biting his flesh, the dirty dead hands ripping out his internal organs, the heavy, crunching blows opening his skull for the brain-eaters …

14

“Freddy!” Tina cried joyously. She ran to him as soon as she entered the embalming room with Ernie, Meat and Scuz. When she got a look at him up close, the joy melted from her face. “Oh my God, Freddy, what did they do to you?”

“I’m sick, Tina,” he whimpered. “Really terribly sick.”

“Me, too,” rasped Frank.

Tina’s eyes darted anxiously back and forth from her boyfriend to her boyfriend’s boss. “But what do you *have,* Freddy?” she blurted, “I’ve never seen anybody look so awful. You look like … like …” She bit her lip, not daring to say what he looked like.

“Like Sunshine,” said Freddy, completing her thought in a mournful, self-pitying whisper.

“Embalming tables! This place is somethin’ else!” cried Scuz, looking all around. “One thing, if you’re gonna croak, you picked the right place, Freddy—they can work on you right here!”

Meat came up behind Tina and squinted at Freddy and Frank. “Man, you look like death warmed over,” he drawled. “Like why are you wearin’ such a *little* earring, man? And why’d you get such a square haircut?”

“Who cares about his hair at a time like this!” Tina snapped.

“The ambulance came,” Freddy rasped. “They’re gonna take us to the hospital and find out what’s wrong with us.”

“Where the hell *are* the paramedics?” Ernie Kaltenbrunner said to Burt Wilson.

Burt shrugged, took his hat off, and nervously ran his fingers through his red hair. “They said they were going out to fetch a couple of stretchers.”

“How long ago?” asked Ernie.

Burt glanced at his watch. “I don’t know—ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Christ, what are they doing, *making* the goddamn stretchers?” Ernie cried. Grimly pursing his lips, he stared at the embalming-room door, and his bony face took on a tense, worried expression.

“They musta split. They ain’t comin’ back,” sneered Meat, ever distrustful of the establishment.

“Chicken-shit bastards!” Scuz cursed.

Frank and Freddy both groaned despairingly.

“Oh, honey, everything’s gonna be okay,” Tina crooned, putting her arm around her boyfriend.

“Those medics wouldn’t just cut out on us,” said Ernie. “They’re trained not to panic in emergencies. They might be in some kind of trouble out there. I’m going out to have a look.”

Scuz and Meat exchanged silent looks that said: Man, anybody who bops on out there on his own is a real *queeb.*

Ernie drew his Luger from under his belt and flipped the safety catch. Then he threw the door open and, raising his arm to shield his eyes against the blinding rain, he stepped out, closing the door behind him. He thought that it ought to be easier to see, even on such a dark, misty and rainy night, because the parking-lot lights were on. Then he realized that most of them weren’t shining and, pointing his gun in front of him, he edged over to one of the lamp posts. Something crunched under his feet—*glass.* The light had been smashed. No doubt that was what had happened to the others. Ernie felt the sick bile of fear rising into his throat.

Up till now, the sounds he had been aware of were mostly those of rain and thunder, but a rising chorus of slurping, moaning and munching sounds suddenly impinged upon his senses. His eyes darted wildly, and he spotted a glow that turned out to be the interior light of the ambulance, parked with its door hanging open. Ernie hurried towards the glow. Then he heard the chant “Brains! Brains!” and realized that the devilish voices were directed towards *him.*

Lightning flashed, and he saw a corpse looking right up into his eyes, with blood all over its mouth and chin. It was munching on a human arm that still wore a tatter of a white paramedic uniform. The corpse was old and hideous, mostly a skeleton held together by tendons and dried, decayed skin.

Ernie fired his Luger at the corpse. The bullet struck it in the forehead with a loud *thwock,* causing it to reel backwards, but it didn’t fall. Instead, it started towards Ernie, still carrying its meal of a human arm.

Out of the rainy darkness, other corpses advanced screaming, “Brains! *Brains!”*

Ernie fired at some of them, but the bullets had no effect. Utterly terrified, he bolted and ran for the embalming-room door, fumbling in his pocket for the keys. He pounded ferociously on the steel door even as he tried desperately to insert his key in the slot. The door came open. Burt Wilson, who had unlocked it, was nearly bowled over as Ernie hurtled into him. When he saw what was coming out of the darkness, he needed no urging to slam the door shut. His fingers shaking badly, Ernie managed to throw the deadbolt. Just in time. The

steel door was shuddering with the demented pounding and screaming outside—“Brains! Brains! Brains! Brains!”

Ernie sagged against a wall, drenched and feeble from terror. He weakly lifted his arm and stared at his gun, trying to comprehend how it could have proven itself so useless when he needed it.

“Them things—we *told* you they was out there,” Meat said.

“You squares never wanna believe us,” said Scuz. “You always think if we say somethin’ strange, it’s ’cause we’re on dope. Well, we didn’t make those things up! Somebody caused them, and I’d like to know who!”

“More of them,” Burt Wilson wailed, holding his head despondently. “More of them like the one we burned. Oh God, are we *never* gonna see the end of this? All I wanna do is go back to my nice peaceful life and have a nice peaceful Fourth of July barbecue …” His voice trailed off in abject misery.

The pounding and screaming kept up outside. For several long seconds, everybody watched the steel door shuddering as it took blow after blow.

“Is it gonna hold?” Meat asked.

“Push somethin’ against it!” said Scuz.

“My supply cabinet,” said Ernie. He and Burt helped Meat and Scuz shove the heavy piece of furniture across the concrete floor. When they got it jammed tightly against the door the pounding and screaming seemed to diminish, but they couldn’t tell if that was because the ghouls were giving up or because some of the sound was now blocked out.

Suddenly both Freddy and Frank groaned in unison, their voices hoarse and raspy like death rattles, and everybody else in the room whirled and stared at them, struck by the eerie realization of how much they sounded like the beings outside trying to get in. Tina kept her arm around Freddy though. She was going to stick by him through thick or thin.

Scuz ran his fingers through his Mohawk haircut, some of the dye coming off on his hand. Staring at the greenness, he said, “Man, this dye isn’t supposed to *run.* It’s that freaking rain! My skin still stings, man.”

“So does mine,” said Ernie.

“Mine, too,” Meat drawled, his black eyes flashing angrily as he turned them upon Burt Wilson. “I just remembered something, man. You said you *burned* one of those ghouls. I think you know more than you’re tellin’. You better open up, man. All of us are in this together, and our lives might depend on our understanding of the true

situation."

"Yeah, I think you better tell us what's goin' on," Scuz demanded.

"We don't have to tell you anything!" Burt snapped.

Freddy let out another horrible groan. "Tell them …" he rasped feebly. "They … have … a right … to know …"

Tina spoke up with righteous indignation. "What did you do to my boyfriend? What's wrong with him and Frank?"

On cue, Frank rasped, "Tell … them … Burt … it's the … least … you can … do …"

Giving in, Burt let his hands fall weakly to his sides, slapping his thighs, "It's a … a chemical," he chokingly admitted. "Some kind of chemical that … I guess … I guess it can make corpses come back to life."

There was a long silence, then Meat spoke up. "Chemical? What chemical?"

Burt backed away, shaking his head, scared that Scuz and Meat might punch him out. "I don't know what chemical. I'm not even sure about its properties. It was developed for the U.S. army."

"You don't know shit from shinola about it!" Meat scowled. "But yet you *do* know it makes corpses come back to life!"

"Yeah, I can see a military use for it!" Scuz jeered. "We could just let all our soldiers attack right out in the open—*hoping* they'd get killed so they'd be buried behind enemy lines. Then when the coast was clear they could come back to life and launch a surprise attack from deep within enemy territory. It'd be better than dropping paratroopers!" He snickered at the absurdity and the horrendous plausibility of the scenario.

"Shut up, Scuz," Meat said, still eyeing Burt. "What *I* want to know is how the fuck did this chemical get all over the freaking *graveyard?"*

"I don't know," Burt said. "All I can tell you is we were storing it at Uneeda Medical supply, and these two geniuses—" He gestured at Frank and Freddy. "—they managed to open a drum and let some of the stuff escape."

Tina gasped, "Is … is that why … why Freddy's sick?" she stammered, hugging him more tightly.

"This is all starting to make a weird kind of sense!" Meat exclaimed, coming over to Freddy and peering at him very closely.

"I … breathed it … Meat," Freddy whispered with great difficulty. "So … did … Frank."

"What did it do to you?" Meat wanted to know.

"I'm … freezing. My … muscles … are … stiffening up."

“Oh, Freddy!” cried Tina, bursting into tears.

His professional curiosity aroused, Ernie Kaltenbrunner blotted rain from his face with a paper towel, and knelt in front of Freddy and Frank. “Stiffening up how?” he asked.

“First,” said Freddy, “I got … a really terrible … headache. Then my … stomach … cramped up … into a knot. And now my … arms and legs … are cramping.”

“Let me see,” said Ernie. He tried flexing one of Freddy’s arms.

“Oh God … that hurts. Oh God …” Freddy groaned.

Frank rasped, “Hey … take it … easy on … the kid.”

“Do you feel the same way as he does?” Ernie probed.

Frank nodded weakly. Both he and Freddy were still sitting half doubled up. Both still looked very grey, with yellowish bloodshot eyes. Ernie rubbed his chin as he stared at them.

“What’s the matter?” Tina asked, alarmed at Ernie’s knowing expression.

“I hate to say it,” he told her, “but it sounds to me like rigor mortis is setting in.”

Tina’s eyes widened and she bit her lip to hold in her fear.

Ernie said, “Help me get your boyfriend’s shirt off.”

Tina helped Ernie slip off the yellow tee shirt with the slogan: I Got My Shit Together. Freddy screamed and complained the whole time, “I’m trying to be gentle, honey,” Tina said.

Ernie pointed to some big purple bruises on Freddy’s back. “I thought so,” he said. “Livor mortis.”

“What’s that?” Tina said, aghast.

“Those purple bruises,” Ernie explained. “Gravity makes the blood pool up when it’s not circulating.”

“Cripes!” Scuz exploded. “You’re *dead,* Freddy! And you’re gonna turn into *them!”*

Everybody except Tina started backing away from Freddy and Frank.

“Nooooo …” Freddy rasped weakly. “Noooo … God, *noooo!”*

Meantime, the white ambulance was out in the lot with its door open on the passenger side. Several corpses were sitting on the wet concrete, slumped against the vehicle like drunken, satiated men.

Other ghouls were restless … unfulfilled. In the savage competition for the available human flesh, they had not had enough to eat. They stumbled around aimlessly in the rain and the lightning, rasping and moaning, “Brains … Brains …”

The fat, muddy corpse in the brown suit—the one karate-kicked earlier by Stan Feldstein—was particularly gluttonous and greedy. It sat on the ground, holding Stan's partially devoured head and neck in its beer belly of a lap. It munched calmly on the back of Stan's head, getting out the last scraps of brain.

The fat, muddy corpse raised its head, wiped its bloody mouth on its mud-caked sleeve, and blinked its yellowish, pig-like eyes. Blink, blink. Yawn.

Drawn by the glow of the interior ambulance light, the big fat corpse got slowly to its feet and wobbled over to the passenger side, and with a grunt, crawled in. The corpse turned on the radio and picked up the microphone. After some fumbling, it got a voice to come out of the speaker.

"Rescue twelve, rescue twelve," the dispatcher said. "Come in, this is dispatch. Over."

The fat, muddy corpse with the greedy, piggish eyes raised the microphone to its lips. "Hello, dispatch centre," the corpse rasped in its choking, injured-sounding tone. "We're going to need back-up at Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home. We have a half a dozen badly injured people here. Please send another ambulance as soon as possible. Over."

"Roger. Will do," the dispatcher said. "Over."

Smiling a sinister smile, the fat, muddy corpse hung up the microphone. His beady eyes gleamed dully in the glow of the interior light as he got out and slammed the ambulance door. He gazed across the dark, rainy lot towards the night light over the embalming-room door, where other ghouls had stopped pounding and were starting to shuffle slowly, with a common purpose, towards the front of the funeral home where entry might be more easily gained.

The sight of the night light still burning gave the fat corpse an idea. He looked out towards the street, at the telephone pole with a cable that led from the pole to the funeral home. Then he waddled to the low point of the powerline, at the side of the building. Ignoring the brief, violent flurry of electrical sparks, he pulled the cable down. With satisfaction, he noted that the night light and all the other lights of the funeral home went out.

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When the lights went out, Ernie was in the process of dialling the police. Everything went black and the phone went dead, and Ernie yelled, “Don’t panic! Everybody stay where you are so you don’t go stumbling into each other! I’ve got candles in my supply cabinet!”

Groping his way between the embalming tables, he made it to the heavy piece of furniture they had used to help barricade the door. He knelt, felt for the correct drawer, pulled it out and found candles and matches.

“Thank God!” Tina said when the first match was struck.

Everybody else’s eyes immediately went to Freddy and Frank to make sure they were still in the same place and still harmless.

“We’ll have to keep a watch on those two!” yelled Burt.

Ernie’s candles were the kind in glass jars. He got three of them going and set them strategically around the room—two on the embalming tables and one on the middle shelf of the supply cabinet—so that illumination was fairly evenly spread.

Meanwhile, mass hysteria started to set in …

“We gotta get outta here!” said Scuz.

“Fuckin’ A,” said Meat. “Anybody here have a car?”

“The Uneeda van,” said Burt. “But I don’t have the keys. They must still be in Frank’s pocket. Frank?”

Frank rasped and groaned something indecipherable.

“He’s no friggin’ help!” Meat yelled. “He’s practically *one* of those things! Remember what you said, Scuz? Behind enemy lines?”

“Yeah, we got two in our midst,” said Scuz, fearfully eyeing Freddy and Frank. “Better watch who you put your arms around, Tina. Whatever they got could be catching. You wanna start turning into something like—like Sunshine?”

“Freddy’s going to get *well!”* Tina said defiantly.

“And what if he don’t?” Scuz challenged.

“He’ll be eatin’ on your brain,” said Meat.

Burt Wilson turned towards Ernie, who had drawn his Luger and was staring at it. “Listen, Ernie,” Burt whispered, sidling closer, “I’m scared to try to take the van key out of Frank’s pocket—no tellin’ what he’s liable to do. Do you have *your* car?”

“Listen up, everybody!” Ernie bellowed, taking command. “I have a

car out there in the lot, but I don't think it'll do us any good!" He paused to allow their uproar to simmer to a low babble. He held up his Luger, pointing it at the ceiling. "I was *out* there, remember? This gun was useless. I shot one of those things in the head and it didn't even faze it. The parking lot is crawling with them! And in the rain and the dark, we'd never get through them—they'd lurk in the shadows and then mob us. So I suggest we try to fortify this place, and stick it out till help comes."

"I wanna split!" yelled Scuz. "If *you* wanna stay, then gimme your car keys and the rest of us'll get our asses in gear!"

"I'm not deserting Freddy!" said Tina.

"You are really a dumb broad, you know it?" Meat told her. He turned to the others, shouting, "Who's all for cuttin' out with me and Scuz?"

"I'm not turning over my keys!" said Ernie, covering Scuz and Meat with his Luger. "Maybe bullets won't work on *them* … but they'll still work on *you!"*

"You pull that shit, you better not take your *eyes* off us," Meat warned.

Just then, a siren wailed in the distance, and they all listened keenly, as if it might mean salvation.

"The cops!" Burt blurted. His eyes lit up with hopefulness. "It's *gotta* be the cops! We're gonna be rescued!"

The siren got louder and closer. Then tyres screeched and doors slammed and the siren stopped wailing.

"Sounds like they're out front!" yelled Meat. "Let's go!" He snatched one of Ernie's jarred candles from an embalming table.

"Man I never thought I'd be so happy to see the fuzz!" Scuz enthused, following Meat towards the stairs.

"Tina, stay here with Freddy and Frank," Ernie instructed. "Burt and I will go up and help check it out, in case those other two decide to just cut and run." He knelt, pulled a big metal flashlight from the bottom drawer of his supply cabinet, and clicked it on.

The four men got up to the foyer just as a brick shattered one of the glass doors. In the reddish strobing light of the ambulance parked out front, ghastly figures were clammering to get in, screaming, "Brains! Brains! Brains!" There was so much of a mob on the porch that the ambulance itself could not be seen. One of the corpses reached through the broken glass, not caring that his flesh was lacerated as he tried to push down on the metal bar that would have opened the door from inside. Shining his flashlight on the dead, groping arm, Ernie smashed and smashed at it with the barrel of his Luger, repeatedly

hammering the rotted wrist and forearm against the jagged slash of glass that remained intact. The dead hand fell off, twitching on the rug. The corpse retreated, staring dumbly at its shredded stump of a forearm. The other corpses also backed away—not so much out of fear, apparently, but rather because they were drawn towards the strobing light of the ambulance. The dead hand continued to twitch until Ernie rolled it up in a carpet runner and shoved it out through the hole in the door. Then he shined his flashlight out on to the lawn.

"Douse that light, man!" Meat yelled. "Them things is like moths—they're *attracted* to light, man!"

"No. That's not what's attracting them to the ambulance," Ernie replied in a low, fearful tone. He kept shining his light out there, and the other three men edged closer to have a look.

The ravenous ghouls had mobbed the two paramedics that had arrived in the new ambulance. It seemed clear now that the ones on the porch had been drawn away by the scent of freshly butchered human meat. The ghouls were moaning and snarling, fighting each other for a share of the meal. The skulls of the two paramedics had already been broken open, and their torsos had been gutted. Now their flesh and vital organs were being bitten and ripped by sharp teeth and clawing hands.

"Oh my God," said Burt, "they're gonna kill everybody who comes here!" Sickened, he backed away from the door and leaned against a chair, trying not to gag.

Ernie pulled his flashlight away from the hole in the glass door. *"Now* do you two guys see why it would be foolhardy to try to make a break for it?" he asked Meat and Scuz.

Badly shaken, they slowly nodded their heads.

"All right," said Ernie. "So let's dig in and fortify. Help me move this."

Meat, Scuz and Burt helped Ernie shove a heavy leather couch against the glass entrance doors. Then they all pitched in and stacked a couple of armchairs on top of the sofa, "It won't keep them out," said Ernie, "if they make a determined mass assault. But it'll delay them … buy us some time. I've got some hammers and nails downstairs in my workroom. We've got to board up all the doors and windows so they can't get in no matter how hard they try."

"What if they try to burn us out?" said Burt.

"I have a hunch they won't," Ernie replied with a confidence he did not entirely feel. "Dead flesh burns easier than live flesh," he told the others in order to bolster their courage.

"Cops are bound to come sooner or later," Burt said. "Two teams of paramedics aren't going to be reporting back to their stations or

showing up at the hospital. Cops are bound to eventually come looking for them."

On that hopeful note, the group pulled together into a cohesive unit, ready and willing to co-operate in a survival effort. Burt and Scuz agreed to guard the inadequately fortified front doors while Ernie and Meat went downstairs to the workroom to get hammers, nails and wood for barricades.

In the embalming room, Ernie stopped to make sure Tina was okay and to have a look at Frank and Freddy, who were still sick and grey and dead-looking. "What happened up there?" Tina asked worriedly. "I heard such an awful racket." She was still staying loyally beside her boyfriend, her arm around his shoulders.

"Everything's under control," Ernie assured her, "but it was touch and go for a while. Burt and Scuz are keeping watch."

"Two more paramedics got gobbled up," Meat said.

"Oh my God!" said Tina.

In the flickering candlelight, Ernie peered closely at the two sick, chemically infected men to see if Meat's tactless comment might stimulate them in some telltale way, like causing them to drool, for instance. But they remained slumped, inert, inscrutable.

"We better get our asses humping," Meat said. "Where's your tools, man?"

Shining the way with his flashlight, Ernie led him down a corridor, through the coffin display room, and into the adjoining workroom. Here there was a bench with a vice, a toolbox, and a pegboard. Ernie rummaged in the toolbox while Meat grabbed stuff from the pegs. They armed themselves with hammers, screwdrivers (for stabbing would-be attackers), a hatchet, a chisel, a coil of rope, some tape, and a big box of nails.

Ernie Kaltenbrunner couldn't help pondering the irony of his present situation. He who had made a career of which he was proud out of making corpses pretty and lifelike was now battling to stop *them* from making *him* ugly and dead. It didn't seem like proper gratitude on their part. If they could only realize how much he had done for them they'd probably leave him alone. Grant him some sort of amnesty. Let him work in peace. If he ever got out of this mess alive, how could he continue in his profession with the same aesthetic attitude he had hitherto enjoyed? How could he look another deceased person in the eyes without wondering what the deceased might turn into? He wouldn't feel comfortable unless he cremated *everybody*. And even then … who could say what goofy, malevolent, chemical properties might remain in the smoke and the ashes?

The other major irony pertaining to this crazy crisis, so far as Ernie

was concerned, was that he was showing some guts and leadership for the first time in his life. He was proving to himself that he could take charge over something besides condolences and regrets. The others were following him, depending on his advice, drawing sustenance from his fortitude and resourcefulness. And it wasn't just because he had the gun. No. They sensed that he had seized command of the situation, because he sensed it himself. He was radiating something new—self-confidence. All of a sudden he, Ernie Kaltenbrunner—high-school nobody, middle-aged bachelor, near virgin, obsequious funeral director—had emerged as somebody worthy of respect, maybe even admiration.

He liked what he had discovered about himself. He liked it so much that even if there ceased to be any more dead people in the conventional sense, and if as a consequence his profession would cease to be meaningful and necessary, he knew he would find some other, and perhaps grander, way of fulfilling his creative urges.

Listening to the new sound of authority in his own voice, he told Meat, "We'll have to come back down for lumber—those planks and two-by-fours in the coffin room. We can break up some of the coffins too, if we have to."

"I guess ain't nobody gonna be needin' them if they won't stay dead," Meat said with a grim chuckle.

Ernie was showing Meat the way up the steps, balancing a load of tools while directing the flashlight beam, when suddenly a loud, agonizing scream echoed down the staircase. Meat froze, then started to back away from the horrible sound, but Ernie urged him on. "Drop everything but your hammer! Let's go!" Behind Meat, Ernie discarded all he was carrying except the flashlight and hatchet as he ran up the stairs.

They burst into the foyer, lit only by an overturned candle in a jar, and saw Burt and Scuz in a life-and-death fight with two ghouls—Morton and Helen Dowden. Stunned, Ernie almost didn't recognize them at first, because he didn't want to believe what he was seeing even when the flashlight beam struck their twisted, groaning, struggling faces. Only a few hours ago, he had been massaging the banker and his wife, breaking out the rigor mortis, and now here they were "alive" again and out of their coffins. Scuz was screaming because Helen Dowden was biting into his Mohawk skull, while Burt was punching her, trying to pull her off. Morton Dowden, his legs only partially usable because his torso had been cut in two and then stitched and harnessed back together by Ernie, was crawling on the floor, trying to help his dead wife by tackling Burt's ankles. But Morton had to grope to find the right hold because he was blind—his

eyelids had been glued shut.

Scuz screeched, “Make it let go! Make it let go!”

The stitches had been ripped loose from one of Helen Dowden’s sewed-on hands and it was twitching on the floor. With her forearms she had Scuz in a choke-hold, and tightening her jaws into a bulging knot of muscle she bit harder into the shaved part of his head. “YaaaaggggghhhhhHHHHH!” he screamed as his skull gave in with a bone-crunching *pop!*

At the same time Burt went down in Morton Dowden’s grasp, and Morton clawed and groped, rasping, “Brains! Brains!” anxious to sink his teeth into Burt’s head.

But Ernie was whaling with his hatchet, pulling Morton away from Burt and chopping at the place where he had stitched Morton’s torso back together, since instinct told him this was his former client’s most vulnerable spot. Burt scrambled out of the ghoul’s reach. Helen was no longer enjoined in the struggle at this point because she was too busy sucking out Scuz’s brain. Ernie yelled, “Help me, Meat! *Burt,* fetch the rope we dropped on the steps!” Glad of the chance to bolt out of there, Burt snatched up the flashlight and skedaddled. Ernie kept on chopping and chopping at Morton Dowden. Meat started pounding his hammer on Morton’s arms, keeping him from clawing at Ernie.

Helen leaned in a corner watching, a blank, satiated look in her eyes as she continued to munch Scuz’s brain …

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Chuck wished Casey would relax a bit so he would have a chance of getting laid, but she remained unapproachable. Every time there was a noise outside—a peel of thunder, the wailing of a siren, or the screaming of a hungry corpse—she shivered and huddled tighter into a cowering bundle, hugging her arms across her breasts. Chuck was scared, but not *that* scared. His horniness was overriding his scaredness. In the cemetery he had sat by, watching Suicide ball Legs, and Casey going off to ball Meat, and he hadn't gotten the least little share of the goodies. He figured that if he could stay close to Casey now, in this crisis, with emotions generally running high and out of control, he might get a chance to score on her that he would never have had under normal circumstances.

They were in the warehouse office. He was sitting behind one of the steel desks and she was sitting behind the other. He had tried going over and putting his arm around her a few times, but each time she had stiffened and held her whole body rigid till he went away. What a shame! If they could agree to forget about the ghouls outside for a little while, it wasn't a half bad setting for romance. The warehouse office would have been pitch black except for the candles they lit one at a time, conserving. There was no electricity and the phone was dead because of the downed powerlines. They had drunk the half pot of cold coffee on the Mr. Coffee machine, and there was no way to make more. Chuck had tried. He had used the flashlight to venture out to the men's room for hot water from the tap, but it hadn't been hot enough to make the coffee grains dissolve.

He wondered if maybe he should've cast his lot with Meat, Scuz and Tina when they had decided to try to make it to the funeral home. But he had let his cock do his thinking for him. When Casey had refused to move because she was too shook up to go out among the ghouls any more, he had volunteered to stay and watch over her. If he had split, it might have made her split too, in preference to being the only one left behind. Maybe he would've been wiser to be more interested in getting away than in getting laid. But, after all, there was no guarantee that the rest of the gang had made it. They might all be dead, their brains sucked out of their frigging skulls.

At least the warehouse was reasonably safe. The walls were corrugated steel and the tall, narrow windows were locked and barred. The tarry corpse down in the basement pounded and groaned

from time to time, but so far it had been unable to break out.

"Chuck," Casey said in a low, trembling voice, "do you think we're going to be rescued?"

He was glad she was asking him that kind of question, depending on him to be wise and strong and maybe starting to fall for him a little bit. He might yet get in her pants. In the orange candle glow, with her long blonde hair and fear-widened green eyes, she seemed especially desirable and vulnerable. "Sure," he told her with a lot more confidence than he felt. "It's just a matter of time. Someone will come and get us out of here."

"S-some-one?" Casey stammered. "I h-hope it's the right *kind* of someone." She meant she was hoping it wouldn't be one of the ghouls.

"Probably the cops'll come," said Chuck. "You heard the sirens before. Squad cars must be out prowling. They're bound to rescue us sooner or later."

"How will they know we're *in* here?"

"Once they find out what's happening they'll search for human survivors."

"In a pitch-black warehouse?" Casey said. "Why would they look *here?"*

"Meat or Scuz or Tina will tell them about us," Chuck said.

"I wish we could be sure," Casey said meekly and mournfully. "What if they don't? I mean …" She let her voice trail off, looking at Chuck with her scared, wide-eyed gaze.

"They *made* it," he said. "They *had* to have made it."

"If they did, I hope they don't just forget about us," said Casey.

"They won't. They're our *pals,"* Chuck said staunchly.

Casey gave him a funny look, and he knew what it meant. No one in the gang really was close to him. In fact they all treated him like a queeb most of the time. They knew he was mainly hanging around with them because he had the hots for Casey. She had been in his class this past term, their junior year, but she hadn't given him a tumble. He wanted her so bad, he had wheedled his way into her crowd. But they sensed he wasn't for real—not really into their punk rock, New Wave kind of shit. He was at heart a square middle-class kid with a heavy crush on a chick who was beautiful but wild. Casey's beauty and wildness teased and tormented him. When she went off with Meat it blew his mind. He was appalled and jealous that she was an easy lay for a freaked-out guy like Meat instead of for him.

"Casey," he asked her, "if we get out of this alive, will it make you look at anything a little differently?"

She shot him a puzzled look. "You mean like becoming more

religious or something? Grateful to God for sparing us?"

"Well … yeah, I guess so," said Chuck, who really hadn't been thinking along those lines. "I admit I've said a few prayers. Have you?"

"No, I almost weakened but I didn't. I don't think praying does any good. If it did, lots of people, like little kids with cancer and stuff, would just get better. They pray to God but he doesn't help."

"Sometimes he does," said Chuck.

"No, he doesn't. If some people are cured, that's just luck. If God was going to help one person, why wouldn't he help them all? I mean, we're all supposed to be equal in his eyes, right?"

"Don't you believe in God?" Chuck asked disconcertedly.

"Not like most people do. If there's a God, I don't think he's up there paying attention to us. He just made us like toys and wound us up and let us go. We're on our own, and he doesn't want to be bothered. That's why everything is screwed up all the time."

"You're an agnostic then," said Chuck.

"I guess so."

"You don't believe in sin?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like sex, for instance. It isn't a sin for you? To do it with whoever you want?"

"No, it's not a sin," she said, "It's not immoral or unethical either, unless I make a personal commitment to do it only with one particular person, or even a group of particular persons, and then go off and do it with other people."

"But so far you haven't made that kind of commitment?"

"Uh-uh."

She peered at him in the candlelight, obviously wondering why he was on to such a subject at a time like this, but she no longer looked quite so scared. Thinking about his questions and answering them had settled her down.

He was incredibly horny. Hearing her talk so frankly about having sex with a whole group of people had fired him up worse than ever.

"Casey," he said, his throat dry.

"Uh-huh?"

"Since you don't think it's a sin to do it with whoever you want, how do you make up your mind who to do it with?"

She thought about it, furrowing her unblemished brow and tossing her long blonde hair back in a careless, automatic way that got to him every time she did it. "I don't know," she said. "I never pick myself

apart to find out *why*. It's just a certain chemistry happens. A certain person, a certain situation. I can feel when it's right, and then I go for it."

He held his breath, then took the plunge. "How about now? With me? Because if we don't get rescued, it might be our last chance to get our rocks off."

"I'll consider it," she told him. "But zombies outside don't exactly put me in the mood."

"We can push those heavy filing cabinets up against the office door," he suggested, anxious to throw her on the floor and do it to her. He was so hard up, he was even scared they might get rescued before he got his chance.

"I don't know," Casey hedged. "I don't know if I can really get into it right now. I mean, it might be bad for you, you know?"

He said, "In the London air raids during World War Two, people made love like mad. It was an affirmation of life in the midst of destruction. The zombies could use some affirming—maybe more than the bombs—don't you think?"

"It makes a weird kind of sense," she conceded.

He got up from behind the desk, and with the bulge in his pants went over to kiss her.

17

After they got the most vulnerable spots of the funeral home boarded up and barricaded, Burt, Ernie and Meat returned to the embalming room. There Tina was watching over Frank and Freddy, both still slumped over, side by side, looking very ill, like life-size rag dolls that somebody had painted a horrid greenish-grey colour.

Morton and Helen Dowden were flat on their backs on the embalming tables. They were both tied up with coils of rope wound around and around their bodies. Both were all battered up from the fight in the foyer, but Morton had received the worst of it—his head was smashed and bruised, and his torso was nearly chopped in two where Ernie had previously stitched and harnessed it. One of Helen's hands was missing, and her mouth was bloody from eating Scuz's brain, but she seemed almost content to just lie there and watch everything that was going on. Apparently this was because her stomach was full, her weird appetite temporarily appeased. Her husband, who hadn't eaten anything since coming back to life, kept moaning and groaning in his raspy voice and trying to break the ropes that bound him to the embalming table, "I'm *hungry* … and I can't *see,"* he complained from time to time.

"I glued your eyelids to keep them shut when you were laid out in your coffin," Ernie explained.

"Can't … you remove … the glue?" Morton begged.

"No, I don't have anything to dissolve it with," said the mortician. "Sorry, but I had no way of anticipating this sort of problem."

"I … can see," rasped Helen, with a certain smugness.

"Um-hummm," said Ernie, "I didn't use glue on you, just plastic eyecaps. You must've clawed them out."

Meat came over and stared with trepidation at the two corpses in the murky candlelight. "Are you sure they're tied up securely?" he asked Ernie. He still had his claw hammer in his hand just in case something happened.

"I don't see why not," said Ernie. "They're no stronger than humans."

Burt Wilson piped up nervously, coming up behind Meat, but no closer. "Well, Ernie, I don't understand what you want with them. I mean, what are we doing? Let's get it over with—put them in the incinerator."

"You're going to … burn us?" Helen rasped. But she didn't sound the least bit scared. She even smiled enigmatically.

"Doesn't that frighten you?" Ernie asked.

"No … nothing can … kill us … we just take … different … forms," said Helen. "There *is* … eternal life … after all." She chuckled hideously.

"We'll *see* about that!" Burt snapped. "Let's cremate them, Ernie!"

"I want to talk with them first," the mortician replied with calm stubbornness.

"Man, I don't dig you undertaker cats!" Meat drawled.

Ernie ignored the objections of the other two men, and addressed Morton and Helen. "Why do you eat people?" he asked.

"Not people … *brains,"* Helen told him. "Primarily we crave … brains. We will … eat human flesh … to stave off … our craving for … brains … but plain flesh … can't satisfy us … completely …"

"Why?" asked Ernie.

"Brains … contain medicine … for our pain," said Helen.

Morton groaned and thrashed miserably.

"What about the pain?" pursued Ernie.

"The pain of being … dead," Helen told him.

"It hurts to be dead?"

"I can … feel … myself rot."

"Christ!" Burt exploded.

"Far out," Meat drawled.

"Very interesting," said Ernie. "What does eating brains have to do with it?"

"It makes the pain go away," Helen informed him.

"Oh, God … I know … I know," rasped Morton.

To Ernie and Burt, Meat said, "Hey, come out in the hall a minute. I wanna talk to you guys."

"Don't leave me alone with them!" Tina gasped.

"They can't get up," said Ernie. "They're securely tied down."

"Babe, you don't have to be scared of the ones on the embalming tables," Meat drawled. "Your boyfriend and his chum is who you gotta be scared of."

"Freddy is going to be okay!" Tina snapped defiantly.

Out in the hall, Meat said, "Listen, how do you kill those things?"

"You don't," said Ernie, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?" said Burt. "We already got rid of one by cremating it! The split dog, too!"

"I'm not so sure about that," said Ernie, "I'm not so sure that the ashes or the smoke from what we burned didn't go up the chimney and then get condensed back down out of the rain … and make these other ones come back to life somehow. Helen said they can't be destroyed, and I believe her. They're not *alive*—they're *animated.* With our own eyes we've already seen how you can chop them up into pieces and the pieces keep twitching and jumping around."

"Oh, fuck. Oh, Jesus," Meat moaned.

"Shit!" said Burt. "The only thing we can *do* is burn 'em! We have to take our chances with the ashes and the smoke. Personally, I'd rather. I mean, I'd sooner have these things all burnt up, to where there's nothin' left to come after me!"

"But what if we're just making *more* of them?" said Ernie.

"A few more ain't gonna make no difference," said Meat. "Already there's *hundreds* of the fuckers out there!"

"How are we gonna burn all them up?" said Ernie. *"That's* the sixty-four-dollar question."

"We can at least deal with the ones we have in our midst," Burt said solemnly.

Meantime, at the headquarters of the Louisville Police precinct that included the warehouse district, the four-to-twelve watch commander was being relieved by the one who came on duty at midnight. The new watch commander, Sergeant Harry McCarthy, was told about the call that had just come in about the missing ambulances. "Two teams of paramedics were dispatched to Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home and neither team has reported in, either to their station or to the hospital."

"I'll take care of it," said Sergeant McCarthy. "I'll send a squad car over there. It's a bad night, what with this awful storm. There's bound to be more than the usual number of crazy incidents and fuck-ups."

"Well, the headaches are all yours now," the off-duty watch commander said with a chuckle, "I'm going home to my bitchy wife. Happy Fourth of July."

"Same to you," said McCarthy.

"Gonna stop for a shot and a beer to brace me up before I look at my wife's fat ugly puss," the off-duty watch commander said on his way out the door.

The mention of booze set off a Pavlovian reaction in Sergeant McCarthy, a big beer-bellied cop with a red, bulbous, whisky nose. He went to the coffee machine and poured himself a cup, then sat down behind his desk, unlocked it and slid open the bottom drawer. From under a police department flak jacket, he sneaked out a bottle of

bourbon and poured a hefty dollop into his coffee. Sipping the black, steaming coffee royale, he began to check the logbook. He grimaced sourly when he noted the huge number of entries: long holidays were always hell. Gulping down some more coffee royale, he looked at his watch: twenty minutes to twelve. It was his habit to show up early to relieve the old watch, and the other guys did the same for him. At about seven-thirty his stint would be done; he had no doubt that he was in for eight hours of insanity—knifings, shootings, drunk and disorderlies, what have you. According to the logbook, the holding cells were already damn near full. It was the holiday spirit bringing out the worst in people.

McCarthy wasn't in any hurry to radio a squad car to check out Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home. The cops who had been on the fucked-up city streets for almost eight hours would be coming in about now, dying to knock off for the Fourth. They didn't need one more gig to cap off a rotten, dangerous day.

So McCarthy decided to wait twenty minutes till some of the cops on midnight shift came out of the locker room armed and uniformed, and then he'd send a couple of fresh, rested-up guys to check out Kaltenbrunner's.

Tina Vitali was in total anguish, her arm around Freddy, trying to protect him. He sat slumped in his terrible sickness, moaning from time to time but saying nothing to her, as if he was far too ill to care about her or anything else any more. His boss Frank was the same way. Both men looked worse than ever, their jaundiced skin a deeper, more repulsive shade of greyish-green. Tina recalled that it was the same way Sunshine had looked after he died of an overdose; but his body had smelled really bad, and Freddy's didn't. She clung to this sign as if it meant hope: if Freddy didn't smell, he couldn't be dead. He couldn't be turning into one of those things.

But Tina knew that Burt, Meat and Ernie didn't see it the same way she saw it. She feared what they might do to Freddy and Frank because of their rising panic. A while ago, she had watched them trundling the tied-up bodies of Morton and Helen Dowden down the hall to the crematorium. To her, the Dowdens were talking, thinking, nearly human, or at least *once* human beings. She could never have brought herself to burn them alive. But Burt, Meat and Ernie hadn't hesitated. Tears streaming down her face, Tina had clasped her hands tightly over her ears in an effort to blot out Morton Dowden's awful, raspy moans and groans as he was slammed into the crematorium oven. For some reason his wife Helen, who had been cremated ahead of him, had done nothing but chortle before she went up in smoke.

When Meat, Burt and Ernie strode back into the embalming room, they had a purposeful glint in their eyes that Tina didn't like as they stared at Frank and Freddy. She stooped and hugged her arms tighter around her boyfriend.

"Sheeeit!" said Meat. "That friggin' ghoul lady *laughed* at us while we were burnin' her up! She didn't care diddly squat! She *knew* she'd come back at us in some different form! But I ain't sweatin' for now. At least we're rid of her ass for the time being!"

"Damn right!" said Burt. "We did the right thing! A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!"

"Look, I went along with you guys, but I'm not so all-fired morally certain about it," Ernie cautioned.

"I ain't stayin' in here with *them!"* Meat said, pointing his arm like a poker at Freddy and Frank.

"Damn right, we gotta *do* somethin' about them," Burt told Ernie to his face.

Tina squealed fearfully. "Do? Do *what?"*

Freddy groaned, holding his stomach. So did Frank. "Oh … it hurts … it *hurts,"* they both rasped.

"I think they're gettin' hungry," said Meat. "And we had better get our asses in gear and dispose of them before they come to realize what they're hungry *for*—'cause it sure as shit ain't chitlins."

"Dispose of them?" cried Tina. "Dispose of them *how?"*

"Well …" said Meat, with a meaningful glance towards the hallway that led to the crematorium.

"You're not going to *burn* them!" Tina shrieked.

"Oh yes—" Burt began.

But Ernie cut him off. "Now, hold on. Let's not go off the deep end. I'm not for doing in anybody that's technically still a human being. That could be construed as premeditated homicide."

"Then let's throw them out!" Meat suggested angrily.

"You bastard!" said Tina. "Why don't we throw *you* out?"

"Because he's not the dangerous one!" Burt yelled at her.

Ernie pleaded with everybody to calm down. "Look, look, we don't have to throw anybody out. But maybe it'd be a lot wiser if we, say, contained Frank and Freddy."

"What do you mean, contain?" Tina asked suspiciously and belligerently.

"Man, the chick is so damn loyal!" Meat jeered. "She don't even care to save her own ass!"

"Quiet!" said Ernie. "I have an idea that should please all of us—

even Frank and Freddy. We can lock them up in a room by themselves, so if they start acting up they can't hurt anybody. And that way if the cops *do* come, we can get them to a hospital right off the bat."

"Why don't you lock yourself up?" Tina snapped.

"Look, don't be such a featherbrain!" Burt told her. "We aren't proposing *doing* anything to them, for Chrissake. Let's just lock them up in another room for a while till we can figure out how to get help!"

"Damn right!" said Meat. "I don't want one of them decidin' to bite on my skull like they done to Scuz and Suicide!"

"Ernie, is there some room where we can put them where we can lock it?" Burt asked.

"Yes … the chapel is what I had in mind. It has no windows. It'd be perfect." He eyed Tina pleadingly. "Will you go along with it? I really believe it's the best thing for all concerned."

She nodded her head slowly and reluctantly. Then she said, "I'm coming with you to make sure you don't stop off in the crematorium."

"We wouldn't sandbag you like that. I give you my word," said Ernie.

"Well, I'm coming with you anyway."

"Watch … how you … pick us … up," Frank rasped timorously.

"Please … be … gentle," begged Freddy.

Tina and Ernie got their shoulders under Freddy's arms, and Burt and Meat did the same for Frank. But as soon as they tried to pick up the two chemically contaminated men they both started screaming: *"Noooo! Oh God, it hurts! It hurts!"*

"Let's let them alone. I can't stand it!" Tina yelled.

"It's either this or we burn 'em!" Burt threatened.

Like moaning, groaning, injured football players being hustled off the field of action, Frank and Freddy were lugged and pulled up the stairs to the chapel. Tina was completely unnerved by the screaming pain her boyfriend was obviously under. His body rubbing against hers felt stiff, arthritic, paralysed. Every jolt and jiggle brought forth an agonized wail, so it was a great relief when they all finally got inside the chapel room which was lit by glowing red Novena candles.

Huffing, Ernie said, "Let's just lay them down on the carpet there."

Frank and Freddy both screamed louder than ever as they were lowered to the floor. Tina knelt over her boyfriend and cried, "Oh, Freddy! Oh, Freddy!" Taking what he felt was a helluva chance, Burt dug into Frank's Uneeda uniform pocket and pulled out the van keys, then jumped back, jiggling them triumphantly. "Got us some wheels now!" he enthused.

“That’s good!” said Meat. “Let’s just leave them here and hightail it!”

“I’m not leaving Freddy!” Tina sobbed.

“You got to be the dumbest chick in the world!” said Meat.

“If you stay here with them, we’re locking the door,” said Burt. “Think what that’ll mean if—”

“I can’t leave him! We’re supposed to get married!” she whined miserably.

“Till death do us part!” Meat scoffed.

“Please … Tina, be reasonable,” Ernie begged. “This is not an ordinary situation by any stretch of the imagination. I think you can be forgiven for not making yourself part of a necessary quarantine.”

“I’m *staying!”* she snapped with absolute defiance.

“Okay … whatever you say,” Ernie said, shaking his head sadly. He and Burt and Meat hurried out of the chapel, leaving Tina with Freddy and Frank.

Just as Ernie closed and locked the chapel doors, Meat and Burt shouted from the foyer. “The cops! The cops! They’re coming to rescue us! They’re pulling up right outside!”

Ernie came to peer through the glass of the double front doors, which had been broken and then boarded and barricaded. Meat and Burt were crouching and leaning into uncomfortable positions to see past aspects of the nailed-up wood and piled-up furniture that blocked the entrance. “What if the ghouls—” Meat blurted, giving voice to the fear that all three men had that the cops would barely get out of their squad car before they’d be swarmed under.

Peering into the dark, hard-driving rain towards the headlights and flashing strobe of the police car, Ernie and Meat and Burt couldn’t make out the presence of any corpses. Instead of giving them comfort, this filled them with ominous dread. They were all three thinking ambush. There was a thick nailed-up plank flush against the place where a jagged hole had been smashed in the glass doors, and Ernie doubted that his voice would carry through it, but he pressed his face as close as he could and yelled, “Look out! They’re out there! Police! You’re going to be attacked!”

“Oh, shit! They can’t hear you, man!” Meat moaned.

“We’re screwed, we’re *screwed!”* Burt whined.

Two big, strong-looking cops—one black and one white—had climbed out of their patrol car and were moving in a slumped way in the driving rain. So far they had not drawn their service revolvers because they could not see any need to. They had parked behind the second ambulance—the one parked right in front of the funeral home

—and apparently hadn't noticed the one in the pitch blackness of the side lot. One of the ghouls must've turned off the ambulance lights; they were no longer flashing.

Ernie tried yelling again. "Help! Police! Be careful! Draw your guns!" The cops didn't react. The pounding storm drowned out whatever muffled sound might have otherwise carried through the barricade. Getting soaked, the black cop and the white cop were both gazing at the ambulance, wondering why it was just sitting there so dark and useless. Ernie started hammering on the glass and the boards with his turned-on flashlight. The racket got the cops' attention but they still didn't unholster their weapons. They started walking towards the porch of the funeral home. At the same time, shadowy figures edged out of the rainy darkness.

Out of frantic desperation, Ernie pulled his Luger from under his belt and fired two fast, booming rounds into the ceiling, bringing down a shower of plaster. Now the cops scurried behind a couple of maple trees on either side of the walkway, and both drew their revolvers. They weren't sure where the shots had come from. They peered from behind the fat tree trunks and when they spotted some of the ghouls advancing they cried, *"Halt!"* But of course the ghouls didn't pay any attention. A dozen—no, *two* dozen of them kept coming out of the stormy blackness.

"Freeze or I'll blow your fucking brains out!" the white cop yelled.

"Brains! Brains!" the corpses started chanting in their hideous death-rattle voices.

"We're screwed, we're screwed!" Burt Wilson lamented once again.

"Not us, man, the fuzz is in worse shape than we are," Meat said in a philosophical but horrified drawl.

The ghouls kept coming towards the cops, hands outstretched, screaming, "Brains! *Brains!"*

The cops both started firing at the same time, their service revolvers flashing and roaring. The white cop plugged one of the corpses right in the forehead, and it must have been a particularly rotted, decomposed corpse because its head went flying and landed with a *thunk* in the sopping earth. But the corpse didn't go down—it just reeled and staggered and kept on coming. "Holy fuck!" the white cop said, and fired again … and again.

The black cop had his own mob of ghouls to deal with, coming at him from the opposite direction. He kept squeezing the trigger till his revolver gave him nothing but dead clicks, and none of his slugs fazed the ghouls. He threw the gun down and started to run back towards the squad car.

The white cop was dragged down by a group of stinking, rotting

corpses who ripped and clawed at his body, tearing off his uniform and biting into his flesh. One of the frenzied attackers chomped at his skull, splintering the bone in grotesquely powerful, brain-seeking jaws.

The black cop yanked open the door of the squad car and got the shotgun from under the dash. He whirled and fired, blowing one of the ghouls apart, blasting flying chunks of gristle and bone and dead meat out of its abdomen so that its torso was cut in two—but the two halves of the thing continued to writhe and crawl in the muddy grass. He let off two more shotgun blasts before the ghouls dragged him out of the car. They swarmed on him in mass ferociousness, and the crawling half of a corpse chomped into his brain.

Behind the barricaded front doors of the funeral home Burt, Meat and Ernie watched in futile terror as the cops were killed and devoured.

"Oh God … Oh God," Ernie moaned in sick revulsion as he turned away from the glass.

"This place is like a black hole," said Burt. "Everybody that comes in gets swallowed up!"

Meat's face shined with fear-induced sweat. "So what are we gonna do?" he ranted. "Just stand around here kickin' our heels till the corpses find their way in? Man, there ain't no *way* we can stop those things! We gotta get outta here!"

"There's the van," Burt said, "If we could make a break for it—"

"No good," Ernie squelched. "We're too damn surrounded!"

"I'm scared to stay here any more," said Burt, "I'm almost willing to take my chances on an escape. You guys saw what happened to the cops. It pretty much shoots the shit outta any hope of being rescued if we stick around here."

"There's a last-ditch hiding place we could use if it comes down to it," Ernie said.

"Where?" asked Burt, his curiosity tweaked.

"Yeah, how come you never told us about it, man?" Meat said indignantly.

"Never thought about it," Ernie told them, "It's the attic. There's a trapdoor and pull-down stairs. I guess I was figuring if we could open it the ghouls could too. But now I'm thinking that we could pretty easily fix it so we could bar the trapdoor once we were up there so nobody else could pull the folding stairs back down."

"Fuck, I ain't barricadin' myself in no attic!" Meat said, "I'm for gettin' our act together and tryin' to cut the hell outta here!"

"Show us where the attic is anyway, just in case," said Burt.

Ernie led the way down the hall past the main slumber parlour with the two empty caskets that had lately contained the mortal remains of Morton and Helen Dowden. Shining his flashlight up at the trapdoor inset into the ceiling, he reached up for a pullcord and yanked on it so that the door swung down on its hinges revealing the darkened loft and the pull-down wooden steps that led up to it.

"Hmmmm … not bad," Burt admitted, rumpling his hand through his red hair. "I wonder if the ghouls are even smart enough to notice the pullcord."

"Sheeeit, them things ain't such dummies," said Meat.

Ernie unfolded the wooden stairs and scampered up into the attic. On his way, he shined his flashlight beam all around so that boxes of funeral-parlour junk could be glimpsed. "We could cut the pullcord off if we had to take refuge," he shouted down to Meat and Burt. "And I can see right now that it would be pretty easy to make the attic secure. All we'd have to do is leave a hammer and nails up here handy. The plywood flooring isn't nailed down, just laid across the beams. We could pull the stairs up behind us, then nail some of this thick plywood right across the hatch." He came back down the stairs. "What do you guys think?"

"Fine as a last resort, but nothin' I'd care to stake my life on," pronounced Burt. "But it can't hurt to put a hammer and some nails up there anyway."

"What the hell *for?"* Meat bellowed, "If we're splittin' this place we ain't gonna need no hammer and nails in the attic noways! You ain't chickenin' out on me, are you, Burt?"

"No, I only meant to put the hammer and nails up there in case somethin' happens before we get our escape plan together."

"I'm staying here," Ernie said coolly. "I was out there once already and I think it'd be stupid to take a chance on going out among those things again. I feel relatively secure here, maybe because it's my own place. More cops are bound to come—in fact they're certain to hit this place in force once they get wise that their fellow officers were wiped out."

"The fuzz might not win out against the ghouls," said Meat. "So far it's flesh-eaters two and fuzz zero."

Suddenly Burt had a burst of inspiration, and his face lit up with the glow of impending salvation. "The friggin' U.S. army!" he shouted in exhilaration. *"That's* who can mop up on these damn ghouls! That's why that phone number was on the drums!"

"What phone number?" asked Ernie.

"What drums?" asked Meat.

"The friggin' phone number!" Burt said. "The steel drums in the basement of Uneeda Medical Supply that contain the mummified corpses!"

"Like the one that got Suicide?" said Meat.

"Yeah! It came outta one of the drums, thanks to Frank and Freddy. There's instructions stencilled on every drum: Property of the U.S. army, and an 1-800 number to call in case of emergency."

"What's the number?" asked Ernie.

Burt scratched his head, and some of the enthusiasm went out of him. "I can't remember," he murmured desolately. "Shit! I musta read it a thousand times, every time I went down to the basement, but now I can't think of it for the life of me."

In a frenzy, Meat grabbed Burt by the collar and yelled into his face. "Think! *Think,* you red-headed honky! Our fuckin' *lives* are on the line here!"

"I c-c-can't c-come up with it!" Burt stammered, "It's one, eight-hundred s-something and I don't know what!"

"Easy, Meat, you can't scare it out of him," Ernie said.

Meat turned Burt loose.

"It gives us a real reason to try to break outta here," Burt said. "Of all the times for my memory to fail me—not that it's ever been worth a shit. Mind we have to get to a phone anyway, as the one here is outta whack. If we could get to the warehouse we'd kill two birds with one stone—get the U.S. army phone number off the drums and phone them from there."

"Two small problems," said Meat. "One, the phone there is dead, too, 'cause we tried it before we cut outta there. And two, the monster that chomped on Suicide's brain is still down in the basement, so we'll have to figure a way to clobber him before we can get to the drums."

"Let's go down to the embalming room and lay out a plan of action," Ernie suggested. "I want to get a hammer and nails down there anyway, to leave up in the attic."

"You still stayin' here, man?" Meat challenged.

"It's good military strategy," Ernie told him. "It'd be unwise to squander *all* our forces in a frontal assault."

18

Locked in the chapel, Tina was still trying to give Freddy what comfort and solace she could. But he and Frank had passed into a stage of their chemically induced illness where they were beyond comforting. In the reddish glow of the Novena candles, they lay in fetal positions on the red-carpeted floor, their teeth bared in horrid rictus. Out of both their mouths came an agonized growling that was unnerving to hear.

Suddenly Frank began to foam at the mouth and roll around on the floor like a dog with hydrophobia. Kneeling by Freddy's head, Tina watched the other sick man with horror. Freddy turned his head slowly and looked up at her out of the corner of his jaundiced eye. In his hoarse, weak voice he told her, "Tina … darling …" He had never used that particular term of endearment on her, and for some reason it sounded weird, "It … hurts more … than anything you … can imagine," he went on, as if merely talking gave him great pain, "and now … I can see … that one thing … and only one thing … can relieve … my horrible … suffering."

"What, honey what?" she asked him, desperately wanting to be of more help.

"Live … brains," he rasped, and suddenly he twitched as if he wanted to make a lunge at her.

She jumped back, screaming, cowering against the wall of the chapel, beneath a fake stained-glass window. It gave off some kind of phoney glow, almost as if light was coming through, but it wasn't really a point of exit.

Freddy held himself in check with a fierce effort. "You see … darling …" he rasped, "… I must have human brains … to eat now … and I … don't want them … to be yours …"

"F-Freddy, what are you s-saying?" she sobbed fearfully.

"You must … escape …" he hissed, "… before I can't … control my hunger … any longer. Open the … door … and go … lock it behind … you so … me and Frank … can't come … after you …"

But Frank, foaming at the mouth, was already up into a half crouch, coming towards Tina. "Brains … brains …" he murmured in his hoarse, sick whisper.

She flung herself at the door and started pounding on it, screaming for help. At the same time Freddy, who had been lying between Frank

and Tina, grabbed at Frank's legs in an effort to stop him. Frank fell on top of Freddy and the two newly created ghouls fought each other, biting and slashing as they rolled on the floor.

Tina screamed and pounded for someone to come and let her out. "Ernie! Ernie! Please *help* me!"

Luckily, the wiry, sandy-haired mortician had been on his way up from the embalming room with a hammer and nails to stash in the attic. Hearing Tina's desperate cries, he started running. "Tina! Tina!" he yelled, hammering his fists on the locked chapel doors.

"Let me out!" she pleaded. *"Please!* He wants to eat me!"

Ernie fumbled for his keys, got the right one inserted, and yanked open the chapel doors. He jumped back, ready to bash Freddy or Frank on the head with his hammer if they got near him, but it was Tina who rushed out into his arms, almost bowling him over. Freddy was still fiercely fighting to prevent the attack on his girlfriend, summoning whatever last vestiges of humanity were yet part of him. Before Ernie slammed the chapel doors shut, he saw Frank use his superior weight and strength to get astride Freddy and ram two prongs of a candelabra down into Freddy's eyes. The younger, weaker ghoul's anguished scream reverberated in the corridor even after the doors were closed and locked. "Yeeeeaaaaaaeee … I'm blind … I'm *blind …"* was Freddy's muffled, raspy cry.

"Oh … the poor creature!" Tina wailed, stunned by the depth of his love—that he would sacrifice himself to save her even as he was turning into a monster.

Ernie hugged and tried to comfort her. "Don't you worry about Freddy and Frank. That's not *them* in there. They've gone to heaven. Those things are just their dead bodies that want to eat our brains." It struck Ernie that the speech he just made wasn't too different from ones that he had made many times in the funeral parlour to bereaved friends and relatives of the loved ones.

Frank—or maybe Frank *and* Freddy—were now pounding on the chapel doors, making them shake and vibrate so much that the lock probably wouldn't hold for very long. The racket had brought Meat and Burt up from downstairs, brandishing a hammer and a hatchet.

"Turned on you, huh?" Meat sneered. "I told you, you dumb broad."

"Lay off her, Meat," Ernie warned.

"What you gonna do about it, undertaker—shoot me? You prob'ly *like* to have corpses walkin' around here, you're so used to hobnobbin' with 'em anyway."

Splinters flew from the doors as they threatened to give way.

"Help me!" Ernie shouted at the other two men. "We've gotta get

some more lumber and nail these doors shut!"

"We're ready to split, man," Meat said, "If you're dumb enough to stick it out here, it's gonna be your own ass!"

"Burt?" Ernie asked with a serious, level gaze. "What do you say? You got me into this in the first place."

"Yeah, but it's comin' apart at the seams," Burt said in a cowardly whine, "I'm not tryin' to desert you, old poker buddy—I'm givin' you the chance to come with us, but you're makin' the wrong choice."

"Get going then," Ernie snapped sarcastically. "Don't let us hold you back!"

The doors continued to splinter at the jambs. The lock seemed to be holding but the hinges were being torn loose.

"Tina?" Meat asked.

"I'm staying with Ernie," she replied bravely.

"Ernie, we're gonna bring the army!" Burt promised. "You'll see. We're gonna make it, old pal!" He was desperately trying to convince himself with his own words.

They all headed for the embalming room—Tina and Ernie to get lumber for barricading the chapel, Burt and Meat to launch their escape attempt. On the stairs Burt said to Meat, "You'll have to cover me … beat the zombies back till I can unlock the driver's side of the van."

Meat said, "Yeah? What about the zombies between us and it?"

"We'll just have to storm them. Fight our way through. If I get behind the wheel I'll unlock the passenger side for you."

"Sheeit! How come I gotta be last in?" Meat complained.

"You got a better plan?" Burt asked.

"No. Let's *do* it!"

They listened at the embalming-room door, decided it sounded quiet enough out there, and gave each other a nod. Ernie unbolted the door and flung it open for them, and they charged out into the rain brandishing their weapons—Meat with the hatchet and Burt with an upraised hammer. Ernie slammed the door shut behind them. They had to cover a distance of about thirty yards to get to the Uneeda van through wind, rain and ghouls, but it was their good fortune that most of the brain-eaters were up at the front of the funeral home, feasting on the dead cops. They only had to contend with about a dozen of the ravenous creatures coming at them in the side lot, moaning and rasping, "Brains! Brains!"

Burt swung all his might with his hammer, knocking the head off a decomposed female, then delivered a hard kick at her still-animated body, knocking her to the wet pavement. Meanwhile, Meat chopped

and chopped with his hatchet, lopping pieces of arms and fingers from the grasping, clawing ghouls. Burt managed to unlock the van and climb in, then punch the lock down. He dived to the other side to unlock the other door for Meat, who was running, trying to scurry around the front of the vehicle ahead of two shuffling, relatively slow-moving zombies. Meat got in and slammed the door and locked it, but zombies were attacking the van itself in their frenzy for fresh human meat, pounding the windows with bricks and beating the metal sides with their fists. The windscreen cracked and a brick came hurtling through, narrowly missing Burt's head. The zombies massed around the van and began rocking it sideways, trying to tip it over, but Burt got the engine started and rammed into gear. The van lurched out, squealing on wet concrete, smacking into two corpses and rolling over them with a crunch-crunch.

Suddenly a corpse dangled down over the top of the van, holding on to the windscreen wipers, its snarling decayed face staring in at Burt and Meat. Burt turned the wipers on, but that didn't dislodge the corpse. It started beating on the windscreen, then it reached in through the hole made by the brick. Its dead fingers were clawing inches from Burt's throat when he swerved the van, wrenching the wheel hard to the left. The corpse slipped to one side but hung on to the rim of the hole in the windscreen glass, but one of its fingers was cut off and fell twitching into Burt's lap. He screamed and swerved the van hard again, back to the right. Meat screamed too, and covered his eyes with his hands. Burt drove the van right up on to the sidewalk, scraping the clinging corpse's legs against the side of the cemetery wall, and at last it lost its grip and fell off. Burt cut the wheel and brought the van back on to the street.

"Christ almighty!" Meat exclaimed, daring to pull his hands away from his eyes.

Burt slammed his foot on the accelerator, barrelling through the rain towards the Uneeda warehouse. "The finger! The friggin' finger!" he yelled. "Get it the hell outta here!"

He flicked on the interior light and Meat looked down at the twitching finger on the floor of the van. He yanked open the glove compartment and found a dirty rag, dived and used this to snatch up the animated finger, and threw the whole squirmy bundle out of the side window. Shaking all over, he wound the window up …

Meanwhile, Ernie and Tina were on their way with lumber, hammer and nails to try to make sure that Frank and Freddy remained safely locked into the chapel room. But they no sooner turned the corner, following Ernie's flashlight beam, when with a loud splintering noise

the door hinges ripped away from the jamb. Freddy and Frank tore the door open and shoved it out of their way as they came plowing through. Frank was in the lead, snarling hideously, crying, “Brains! *Brains!”* Freddy groped behind him, feeling his way with his dead grey hands, dried blood caked in his eye-sockets and in rivulets on his cheeks.

Tina screamed, “Freddy, don’t! It’s me, Tina! I love you! It’s me!”

Frank and Freddy started coming after her with vigour, shuffling and groping in the hallway.

Desperate, Ernie whirled and looked up at the pulldown stairs that led to the attic. He yanked Tina around and pulled her after him. Then he tugged the cord and the stairs opened a crack on the trapdoor hinges. In a mad panic, he got the wooden steps unfolded and down. Then, with his hammer and nails he scrambled up into the loft. Tina came tumbling in after him, and they both tried to pull the steps up, but Frank was already climbing them and they couldn’t lift his lumbering bulk. Thinking fast, Ernie slid a section of plywood flooring over the hatch and then he and Tina both used their bodyweight, sitting on the plywood to stop Frank from pushing it away while Ernie frantically drove nail after nail.

Frank kept pounding and screaming for live brains. Freddy, in his groping blindness, called out, “Tina … where are you?”

“Oh, Freddy!” she wailed in misery and terror.

Ernie didn’t stop driving nails.

19

Lying on one furniture mat and blanketed with another, Chuck and Casey were snuggled in a post-coital embrace on the floor of the warehouse office, wishing the world could begin and end with the nest they had made here for themselves, wishing there was no danger outside. They had made love like there was no tomorrow, and now they were torpid, satiated, and, once again, scared out of their wits. They clung to each other in their nakedness, craving the warmth of each other's bodies and the mutual assurance that they existed and therefore might continue to exist as ordinary mortals, despite the occasional raspy cries and frenzied, determined pounding of the zombie in the basement who wanted to eat their brains.

Suddenly there was a commotion from a different direction—the front of the warehouse—and Casey screamed. Chuck jumped up and started pulling on his chino trousers. They thought they heard a screech, a door slam and a human shout. Then the entrance door rattled, followed by rushing footsteps and loud cursing: "Them damn *things!* One of them damn near bit my arm!"

"It's Meat!" Casey cried joyously, "It's Meat's voice! He's *back!"*

"Who's in there?" Burt yelled, pounding on the office door.

Not recognizing this second voice, Chuck shouted, "Meat? Meat? Is that you? Who's with you out there?" He had his striped shirt half on and was crouching, fumbling with his shoes.

Casey was struggling into her tight purple slacks and white turtleneck. "Meat?" she called out timidly. "Are you *you?* I mean … you haven't turned into one of *them,* have you?"

"Casey!" Meat yelled, "It's *me,* babe! Open up!"

Burt rattled a key in the lock, then swore. "Goddamn it! The door won't open! What's goin' on here?"

Chuck and Casey, still partially undressed, shoved the heavy filing cabinet out of the way so the door could swing in. Burt and Meat rushed into the office, ready to start swinging with the hatchet and hammer. Arms upraised, Chuck and Casey yelled and backed away, trying to duck behind one of the steel desks. Casey dived to the floor, curled into a ball, and whimpered. Chuck bawled, "It's *us!* It's *us!* Meat, don't kill us, for Chrissake!"

They all froze and eyed each other suspiciously for several long seconds, then Meat and Burt lowered their weapons. Chuck pulled the

whimpering Casey to her feet. Meat stepped towards them, sniffing, smelling the odours of recent love-making and casting a glance at the balled-up furniture mats on the floor. “Hey, babe,” he said, “looks like you found somethin’ to do to pass the time.” There wasn’t any malice in his voice, only amusement. “Chuck, you couldn’t get it on with her any other time, place or way,” he said knowingly.

Chuck and Casey hurriedly finished fastening and pulling on their clothing. Bringing them up to date, Meat said, “Scuz bought it. Tina’s okay … but Freddy is just about all the way turned into a ghoul.”

“Oh, shit!” said Chuck.

“Poor Freddy,” Casey sobbed.

“I wouldn’t be so quick to say poor Freddy if I was you,” Meat informed her. “It looks like that fuckin’ queeb and some cat he worked with here at the warehouse caused this whole shittin’ mess.”

“How?” Chuck cried, totally flabbergasted.

“No time to go into the gory details right now,” Burt said. “We’ve gotta go down into the basement and get that phone number off those drums.”

“Cripes! Do you know what’s *down* there?” Chuck said. “A tarry, rotted mummy, and what’s left of Suicide! It ate Suicide’s brain!”

“That’s why it’s still hungry,” Meat joked, “It didn’t hardly get enough to eat.” Nobody laughed. “Suicide’s brain would barely be an appetizer,” he added, but still nobody dug the humour.

“We’ve gotta stave that monster off,” said Burt. “Just long enough to get that emergency phone number. Then the U.S. army’ll come and rescue us.”

“I don’t know,” Chuck said doubtfully. “Have you *seen* that thing down there? It’s a real *ugly* one! All black and runny!”

“Maybe we can decoy it,” Burt said.

“Decoy?” Meat repeated sceptically.

“Yeah. Instead of tryin’ to keep it in the basement, let it come out and chase one of us. Then somebody else can run down and get the phone number.”

“Sheeeit … who’s willing to be the bait?” Meat drawled.

“Well, I’ve always been a gambling man,” Burt said. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and took out a pair of plastic dice. He rolled and got a five—low enough to make him sweat while the others took their turns. Chuck came up with double fours, then Meat rolled snake-eyes, the lowest possible score. Trembling, Casey rolled and got snake-eyes too. It was between her and Meat; they both had to roll again. This time he got a six and she got a three. “Sorry, babe,” he told her, but he didn’t offer to take her place.

So Casey was bait.

Since Meat had had the next lowest roll, Burt told him he had to be the one to run down and get the phone number. He argued and cursed, but accepted the assignment, although he said it really would have been fairer for him and the other two men to roll the dice again for the "honour".

They worked out their plan, and made one of its essential elements out of a length of nylon rope and the two heavily padded furniture mats that Casey and Chuck had used for a lovemaking nest. Then they all took their strategic positions.

Casey and Meat went to the basement door, and Meat started unboarding it, pulling the nails out. The chemical mummy heard him doing this, and stayed right at the top of the stairs, banging on the door and moaning, "Brains … brains … brains … brains …"

Meat now felt better about his part in the plan, because he knew what Burt and Chuck had to do, and it wasn't a piece of cake. But he was still scared. If anything went wrong, both he and Casey would be goners.

She stood there shaking all over and wondering if she was going to have the strength to run when the moment came. Her legs were rubbery and weak. She was afraid to die. It would be so unfair. She had barely turned seventeen. Her entire life was supposed to be ahead of her, but she was facing a quick ending at the hands of a stinking, rotting, clawing and biting corpse.

Finally, the last nail popped out of the barricaded door. Meat leapt back, flattening himself against the wall. Screaming "Brains! Brains!" the black, tarry chemical mummy bashed the door open, which swung outward blocking Meat from the monster's view. It saw Casey and lunged towards her. She screamed, stumbled and ran, a jolt of adrenaline giving her the energy of mindless panic. The oozing monster came shuffling after her, rasping and moaning its craven hunger.

When they were far enough away from him, Meat squeezed out from behind the door where he had flattened himself against the wall, and dashed down the basement stairs. He remembered the broken third step and avoided it just in time, saving himself from a bad fall.

Casey ran down one of the tall steel aisles of warehouse shelving, knowing which one to take because it was lighted by candles placed along the floor. At the last candle, she stopped in her tracks and faced the monster that was droolingly coming after her, hissing its putrid breath. She cowered, acting too petrified to run for her life any more, which was almost the truth. The monster lunged for her, and she whirled and jumped back.

At the last instant, the home-made “net” of furniture mats and rope dropped, draping itself over the tarry ghoul, and Burt and Chuck jumped down from their perches on the parallel tiers of shelves. They wrestled and tugged, pulling the monster off its feet and rolling it in a bundle on the floor. “Help us! Help us!” Burt cried, and Casey forced herself into action, throwing her weight on top of the thrashing, heaving bundle while the two men frantically wrapped it in coil after coil of rope.

By that time Meat had come back up from the basement and he also helped to wrap the monster up.

“Did you get the phone number?” Burt shouted into Meat’s face.

“Got it!” he shouted back.

“Did you write it down?”

“No sweat, man, it’s in my head!”

They dragged the bundled-up chemical mummy, oozing slime, into the warehouse office, and Burt slammed the door and locked it. Then they all took a breather before battling their way out to the van. The next step was to get to a phone.

20

The police-watch commander, Sergeant Harry McCarthy, was now drinking straight from his secret bottle, not bothering to pour slugs into black coffee. His whisky nose was a brighter shade of red, and his baggy eyes were baggier and more bloodshot. His grey hair was a rumpled mess from scratching his thick fingers through his scalp, trying to figure out what the hell to do.

Why couldn't his watch be plagued by the ordinary incidents—stabbings, shootings, rapes, assaults, accidents, domestic squabbles—stuff he could *handle* instead of whatever the fuck was going on out there that kept making cops and squad cars and paramedics and ambulances disappear as if they had been swallowed by the Bermuda Triangle?

His second team of officers had presumably gone out to Kaltenbrunner's Funeral Home over an hour ago—at least he had radioed them to go there—but since then he had had no communication from them to confirm that his orders had been followed. He assumed that they had. So now he was down four men and two cars and had no idea on God's green earth *why*.

Should he send another team of cops into oblivion?

He slugged down some more whisky and pondered the excellent odds that he would be kicked off the police force and lose his twenty-year pension just when he was only half a year from being able to claim it. All right. All *right*. He wouldn't send *just* another squad car. This time he'd give them air support. He'd send a squad car *and* a helicopter.

Encouraged by this whisky-inspired brainstorm, he radioed the police chopper station …

"I feel so *trapped* up here," Tina wailed. "How in the world is anyone going to rescue us *now?"*

Ernie put his arm around her. They were sitting in total darkness in the attic loft. He had turned off his flashlight to conserve the batteries. Feeling the young, pretty girl's warm body shivering against him made him feel manly and protective, even in these dire circumstances. Up till now he had always been shy and awkward in the presence of desirable women, but now, because of his new-found self-respect, he believed that if he ever got out of this alive in the conventional sense,

he would deserve and maybe even land somebody as nice as Tina. He wasn't even tongue-tied with her. In fact he did a pretty good job of coming up with consoling words. "When the police start understanding the scope of this emergency, they'll mobilize. They'll get here in force. And they'll have sophisticated weaponry; not just regular guns and hatchets and hammers like we have. If it takes flamethrowers and bazookas, that's what they'll bring in. Whatever will destroy the ghouls. Then they'll comb all the buildings around here for human survivors. When they come into the funeral home, we'll have to yell and stomp—let them know we're up here. We won't come down till we're sure it's safe."

"What if the cops shoot first and ask questions later?" Tina wondered aloud.

"We'll just have to be careful," said Ernie. "You know, we don't really have to unboard the hatch till we *know* it's all clear. We can wait for the ghouls and the cops and *everybody* to be gone."

"That sounds like the best idea," said Tina. "I guess I could stick it out up here for a long time if I knew I had to … If only we didn't have to be always in the dark! It's so pitch black up here it gives me the creeps."

"I think I can fix that," Ernie told her gently. "There ought to be some graveyard candles in one of these cardboard boxes." He clicked on the flashlight and started to rummage, stirring up dust and irritants from the fibreglass insulation.

Just then, he and Tina heard, through the roof and the patter of continuing rain, the whirring of helicopter blades. They listened hard. The whirring didn't fade. It just hovered and got louder.

"It's them! It's the cops!" Tina cried hopefully.

From directly beneath the hatch, through the plywood barrier, came Freddy's sick, raspy voice:

"Come on … down … I'm waiting … for you … Tina … darling …"

The powerful searchlight beam cut a conical swathe downward through the night rain as the police chopper moved in a hovering circle above the funeral home and its side lot. The pilot and co-pilot spotted a dozen or more scurrying figures down below, scuttling like cockroaches out of reach of the beam, into the surrounding darkness.

With its siren and flashers going, the third squad car of the evening rendezvoused with the helicopter, pulling into the lot and parking by the second squad car and the ambulance that had brought Berchok and Feldstein to their deaths. The cops in the car radioed the chopper pilot for a briefing.

“Your immediate vicinity looks clear at the moment,” the pilot said. “But proceed with utmost caution. We’re dealing with some kind of mob scene … maybe a riot that’s winding down. Some of the participants split when they saw our beam. We’re going to give chase and expand our surveillance. Over.”

“Okay, we’ll check out the scene here,” the driver of the squad car said. Hunching their shoulders against the rain, he and his partner got out of their vehicle, shining their big red-rimmed flashlights. Seeing no immediate danger, they did not draw their revolvers.

The helicopter moved off slowly towards the cemetery, its low-flying blades beating loudly and its searchlight beaming in yellowish brilliance out of the blackness of the rainy night.

The two cops on the ground approached the squad car they had parked next to, shining red-tinged light on its rain-beaded windows. They could have sworn nobody had been in there just a moment ago, but now they glimpsed somebody sitting on the passenger side. They both had the same thought: it could be an injured or dazed cop who had managed to get himself up from the seat or the floor. The figure moved, and the door of the car swung open. An apparent policeman got out. “Manko? Donaldson?” he called out in a hoarse, hurt-sounding voice. He was, of course, a corpse. He had heard the correct names of the approaching officers over the police-band radio in the car. He was wearing a dead officer’s uniform.

Manko and Donaldson were lulled by being called by name by what they thought was a fellow officer who had been hurt. They squinted through the rain, trying to make out the face. By the time they saw the rictus grin it was too late—the bogus cop had pounced upon Manko and was biting into his skull. Then five more ghouls came out of the shadows at Donaldson. He drew his revolver and squeezed off a round, shooting Manko’s attacker in the head, but to no effect. The ghoul-cop just kept biting, crunching Manko’s skull.

Donaldson hurriedly fired three more rounds and was positive they had been direct hits. In the beam of his flashlight he had seen chunks of flesh flying when the bullets struck. But his attackers kept coming, screaming and hissing “Brains! Brains! Brains! Brains!” To his horror, he saw that their faces were dead—half rotted away—and he turned and ran, but not for his squad car because the way was blocked by a mob of ghouls. Instead he dashed for the side door of the funeral home and pounded on it for all he was worth. “Help! Help! Let me in!” he yelled as the ghouls shuffled towards him en masse.

Suddenly the helicopter’s searchlight beam lit the ghouls up and machine-gun bullets began shredding them to pieces, strewing squirmy, twitching body parts all over the wet pavement. But even the

decapitated or dismembered ghouls kept coming at Donaldson, limping, crawling and staggering in their relentless pursuit for living flesh. Some were already too close to him to be singled out for a burst of machine-gun fire from the air, and he couldn't fight them off—they were reaching and clawing and snarling. In sheer desperation he fired another slug *smack* into the face of his nearest attacker, and felt his own eyes bulging in disbelief over the grin that somehow did not fade even though great bloodless gaps were blown in the grey gums and yellowish teeth.

Then the side door of the funeral home opened, and Donaldson entertained the fleeting terror-stricken hope that he might be saved. But Frank Nello, now a fully fledged ghoul, came out, choking Donaldson and biting his face as the other ghouls joined in, ripping and tearing and chewing.

The cops in the helicopter had stopped strafing the area, since their machine-gun bullets seemed to have so little effect on the ghouls. But they continued to circle and observe with their bright searchlight.

To the watch commander, Sergeant Harry McCarthy, who was by now half drunk, the pilot of the police helicopter radioed the following berserk message:

"Command, this is Air Three! I repeat, Air Three! We've got a terrible, unbelievable situation here! Terrible! Manko and Donaldson have just been killed and—and—*devoured!* We saw it with our own eyes! I know it sounds crazy, but there are mobs of—of *cannibals* down there! And they can't—I repeat *can't* be killed by bullets! Our men have been murdered—overwhelmed—by bloodthirsty, ravenous, fiendish *assailants*—perhaps mutants of some sort—or—or—or robots—or creatures from another *planet!*"

McCarthy downed another big swig of whisky and tried to calm the pilot down—even tried to talk to the co-pilot. But the same kind of blubbering bullshit kept coming out of both their mouths. And they were normally hard-nosed, straight-up-and-down, no-nonsense police officers.

McCarthy could feel in his guts that *something* weird was going on out there. But it couldn't be as fucking off the wall as the chopper men made it sound. Could it be a mass hysteria? McCarthy hoped so. Even if it was something weird, he wanted it to be something explainable. Something that could eventually be analysed and understood. Not something that would give him nightmares in his alcoholic old age. Not something that would cause him to lose his badge just when he was almost ready to retire.

To placate the babbling, half-loony chopper men, he had promised to send a dozen riot wagons and a dozen squad cars. He had promised

to put up a blockade around the whole warehouse district. He wondered if he should follow through, or if he should refrain from pushing the panic button just because some other people were pushing it.

The duty phone rang. He picked it up and heard *more* babbling: “Hello? Police? Thank God! This is an emergency! I’m Burt Wilson from Uneeda Medical Supply, but I’m calling from a pay phone and I gotta talk fast because *ghouls* are gonna attack us if I stay on the line too long! You’ve gotta help us or we’re goners!”

“Ghouls? *Help* you?” the watch commander bellowed. “What the *fuck* is going on out there?! Is everybody going bonkers? I’ve lost six good men and nobody can tell me a damn thing that makes sense! I’ve heard everything from ghouls to cannibals to robots from another planet! Well, I don’t wanna hear that kind of shit! Either hit me with some logic, or phone somebody else, buddy—like a shrink or a funny farm maybe!”

Burt said, “I’m gonna call the army, but I wanted to alert the local authorities first. It’s … it’s … I couldn’t explain it if I tried. But, see, the graveyard’s full of people who aren’t dead who are stark, staring mad and will kill you and eat you if they catch you. It’s a disease, see, like rabies, only faster, lots faster, and it keeps making people turn dead but not dead. Listen, I know it sounds crazy, but I—”

Sergeant McCarthy slammed the receiver on to the cradle. Utterly disgusted and confused, he polished off the last two inches of whisky and slammed the bottle into the bottom drawer of his desk. In a tired, sad, slurred voice, he mumbled to himself, “A crank call … I can dismiss this last one as a crank call. But what about the chopper pilot and co-pilot? Nerve gas? Brain damage? Maybe *I’m* the one who’s brain damaged … hearing things … *imagining* that I’m losing all my men … like some deranged battlefield sergeant …”

While the watch commander was mumbling to himself, Burt was sagging against the wall of a phone booth, letting the receiver drop to his side. Meat and Chuck, armed with the hatchet and hammer, were guarding the booth, keeping an eye out for ghouls, although there didn’t seem to be any in the immediate area. The van was parked by the booth, and Casey was staring anxiously out the side window.

“What’s up, man?” Meat said to Burt. “Don’t the fuzz believe you?”

“The damn cops!” Burt cursed. “This situation is way above their fuckin’ heads! The army! I’ve gotta call the army!” He hung up long enough to break the connection. Then he put in a quarter and dialled the operator. “What’s that number?” he said to Meat. “Give it to me.”

Meat recited it and Burt repeated it: 1(800)454-8000. Burt stood waiting, very tensely, with the phone to his ear. It rang once. Click. It

was picked up. An expressionless male voice said, “Hello?”

Burt said, “Yes, I’m calling the number stencilled on some steel drums.”

“Your name please?” the voice said with the same lack of expression.

“Burt Wilson.”

“Stay on the line, Mr. Wilson, you’re being transferred.”

Burt heard a click and a beep. Then a tinny, filtered voice, different from the first one, said, “This is Comm-Q, Denver, go ahead.”

“Denver?” Burt muttered perplexedly, but he hung on the line.

Another filtered voice said, “Denver, this is Wichita. I have a CLY priority on a one-one-three. Who’s up?”

The filtered voice from Denver said, “That would be Colonel Grover … San Diego … I’ll put you through.”

In the phone booth, listening to all this meticulous, filtered dialogue in great suspense, Burt gave Meat a baffled look.

It was a quarter past midnight California time, fifteen minutes into the Fourth of July, when the special phone at Colonel Horace Grover’s bedside didn’t ring but went beep-beep. In his Spanish-style villa by the Pacific Ocean, the colonel sat up, wide awake, as if he had had a dream premonition that the long-awaited phone call would come. He stared at the beeping phone, the glowing red light.

“Horace …? What is it …?” his sleepy wife murmured.

As usual, he ignored her. He grabbed the phone and stuck it to his ear. His heart was pounding with wild hope that this could mean the end of Operation Drummer Boy. Into the phone he said, “This is Drummer Boy Eagle at Station Three. Come in, please.” He listened to the filtered voice with rising excitement. It was Wichita! Something was really up! “Yes, Captain,” he told the filtered voice, “I see. Very well. Put that call through to me. Yes, put him on.”

The colonel’s wife sat up in her wrinkled nightgown, her hair in curlers, the flesh on her arms and shoulders flabby and pallid. The colonel grimaced at her with distaste, knowing she would interpret his expression as one of dire seriousness over this particular phone call. In the orange glow of the bedside light, he punched buttons on the phone console, lighting up half the board, and at the same time he grabbed for a pencil.

A babbling idiot named Burt Wilson came on the line. The colonel listened, then replied with enforced calmness in his voice even though he was *sure* now that Drummer Boy was about to break. “Yes, Mr. Wilson? Where are you speaking from?”

A pay phone. Louisville. Warehouse district. Uneeda Medical Supply. The colonel took rapid notes as the idiot continued to babble. “Um-hm … yes … I see. When did this take place?” He listened and scribbled. “When was the drum first breached?” He scribbled some more. “Why didn’t you call this number immediately?” He got a stupid, half-incoherent excuse, but he wrote it down anyway. “I see. It’s understandable. What happened next? Uh-huh. I see. I see. And did you try to stop them?” He scribbled. “Were you able to stop them?” Wilson got louder and louder in his pandemonium, raving and cursing about chemicals, ghouls, brains, twitching pieces of bodies, and what have you. The colonel gave up trying to get it all on his notepad. “I see,” he said when he could get a word in edgeways. “Nothing short of total reduction to ash. I see.” Wilson wanted to keep babbling, but the colonel had all the information he needed now, so he cut the man off. “Yes, I see. Of course. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Wilson. I’m going to switch you back to Wichita now, and an officer there will talk to you.”

A gleamy-eyed grin on his face, Colonel Grover punched the lucky call over to another line on his phone console, then swung his white, bony legs out of bed. Despite the heaviness of his paunch, his legs were sparrow thin, giving him, in his white tee shirt and shorts, the appearance of an egg mounted on two pipe stems. Clutching her throat, his wife touched his arm, and he recoiled from her touch. “Dear …? Is it …?” she whispered tensely.

He nodded, pulled on his blue flannel robe, and went out of the bedroom and into his study, hitting the light switch and shutting the door. He opened the liquor cabinet that contained more electronic equipment, inserted his card key, punched a single red button as he picked up the phone and put it to his ear. After three muted beeps, General Milton Dunstan, the supreme commanding officer of Operation Drummer Boy, answered Colonel Grover’s emergency call.

Grover said, “Sir … this is Drummer Boy Eagle. Sorry to disturb you at this hour, sir, but we’re at Q-2 status. Yes, sir, at last! It looks like we’ve found that lost consignment of Easter eggs.”

“Are you *absolutely* sure, Colonel?” the general demanded.

“Yes, sir, pretty sure. They’ve turned up in Louisville at an outfit called Uneeda Medical Supply. It rings a bell, sir. That damned defector, Aston, was familiar with Uneeda and its connection with some of our other operations. Not only that, sir, but our tap on the Civilian Law Enforcement Network has been feeding us some intelligence on some pretty weird communications within the Louisville Police Department. When you put it all together, it constitutes pretty hard confirmation, sir. Louisville, Kentucky, sir.”

"Well, this is good news, Colonel Grover!" the general said.

"Well, it would be good news, sir, except that the eggs have hatched."

"Oh my God!" General Dunstan said. "That's horrible! Is it …? I mean …?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid so, sir," Colonel Grover said, "It looks like our worst-case scenario."

"You mean …?" the general sputtered.

"Yes, sir," Colonel Grover said in a tight, awestruck voice, "I'm afraid I have to ask you to confirm the order for Extreme Urban Sanction."

In Louisville, Burt Wilson was still holding on the pay phone, after answering more questions put to him by the army communications command in Wichita. Meat and Chuck, standing by with their weapons, and Casey, leaning her head out of the side window of the Uneeda van, were listening with exhausted intensity. "Hey, man, the suspense is killing me," Meat said. "At least give us some kind of hint what's happenin' on the other end of that line."

Burt cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "These army people sound pretty confident. They seem to say they've been waiting for this to happen. Apparently they've got a contingency plan to deal with it."

"That's great!" Casey said.

"What is this great fuckin' plan?" Meat said suspiciously.

"I'm not sure," Burt admitted. "But they want us to find shelter and hole up. Don't leave the city under any circumstances."

"I never, *ever* trusted the army," said Chuck. "But this time I guess none of us have much choice. We can't beat those things on our own, that's for sure. All of us might already be contaminated."

"Yeah, man, did you ask them about that?" Meat said to Burt.

"Not in so many words," Burt replied nervously. "But I'm sure they got my drift. They *understand* this thing. They say to hold tight and they'll solve all our problems."

21

When the order for Extreme Urban Sanction was confirmed down through the chain of command, the final telephone in the Top Secret Operation Drummer Boy link-up began beeping. This phone was picked up by a twenty-two-year-old U.S. army gunnery sergeant. He was sitting in a little cab at one end of a long, flat railway car parked on a quiet spur, out in the middle of nowhere, in a forest of low scrub pines.

On the bed of the flatcar was a huge brown cannon, a 150-millimetre howitzer.

Smoking a cigarette, the gunnery sergeant gazed out the window of his duty cab, admiring the sunrise. As he spoke into the telephone, the red orb of the sun was just peeping into view over the tops of the low, scraggly pine trees.

"This is Drummer Boy seven," the sergeant said. "On station for red alert."

He wasn't nervous. He wasn't alarmed. He believed that this was just a drill. He believed, because he had been told so, that his cannon contained a live shell capable of being fired but without a nuclear warhead.

He had never fired his cannon before. Previous drills had never gone that far. But even if he did fire it, it was his belief that the spent shell would parachute harmlessly down somewhere, probably way out in the ocean, when it ran out of propulsion energy.

He listened and dutifully wrote down the code numbers that he was given by his superior officer. "Yes, sir. Archimedes. Hot dog. Rhubarb. Niner Zero. Gotcha, sir."

The voice of the superior officer continued with more instructions. "Bearing—Mark—Two—Two—Zero."

"Yes, sir," said the gunnery sergeant. "Gotcha, sir. I have bearing, two, two, zero." He began dialling the information into the howitzer's mini-computer.

The huge cannon swivelled around, rotating from one compass point to another, on giant, purring gimbals.

The sergeant listened to his superior officer as he was given range and angle co-ordinates.

The long muzzle slowly rose until it reached the desired arc, aiming above the trees, out to the horizon.

With a beep, the word “locked” flashed on the screen of the mini-computer.

A huge artillery shell, bearing a red-and-yellow radiation symbol, rolled into the breech and was chambered snugly with a loud metallic clang.

“All ready here, sir,” the gunnery sergeant said.

Over the red-alert phone, his superior officer, whom he had never met, gave him the order to fire.

Unconcerned, because he was sure this was just one more harmless drill, he enjoyed the flaming belch and terrific kick of the giant cannon as it rocked the railroad car back on its springs.

22

Tina and Ernie were still huddled in the attic, but now they had a candle going. She felt a little better not being in the pitch dark any more, but she was still glad that Ernie kept his arm around her. She knew that she could be a lot braver and not so scared, if Freddy wouldn't keep talking to her, yelling up through the barricaded hatch. In a way, she still loved him even though it wasn't *him* any more but somebody—some *thing* that wanted to kill her.

She trembled against Ernie as her boyfriend in his altered state spoke to her in a hissing, pleading voice. "Tina … this is … Freddy … come to … me … darling …"

"Oh dear God!" Tina gasped.

"Easy … easy," Ernie said, hugging her.

Freddy's raspy voice permeated the loft. "Tina … it was wrong … for you … to lock … me and Frank up. He blinded … me … when I … fought him … to let … you escape … from him. But I … forgive you … darling … and I … know … where you … are … even if I … can't see you. I can … smell … your brains …"

Tina moaned and buried her face in Ernie's shoulder.

Freddy said, "I'm … coming … Tina …"

He started pounding more fiercely than ever on the plywood that was nailed over the hatch. Some of the nail heads looked like they might start to pull through. But just as abruptly as he had begun, Freddy stopped pounding.

Tina emitted a scream of terror and relief.

Freddy resumed pleading with her. "Tina … listen … to me. We … always meant … so much … to each … other … so … please … open the hatch. It's wrong … awfully wrong … that you … should keep … me locked out … like this …"

Crash! The blocked hatch shook as something smashed against it from below. Tina and Ernie scuttled away as fast as they could.

Underneath them, through the barricade, they heard Freddy's raspy, anguished moan. Then he said, "See … now you … made me hurt … myself again. In fact … you made me … break … my hand … completely off … this time. But I … don't … care … darling … because I … love you … and you've got … to let … me eat … your *brains …"*

Wham! Again Freddy banged his arms and his one remaining fist

against the hatch.

Tina screamed and clung to Ernie, shaking all over. He held her and patted her tear-dampened long black hair.

Freddy rasped, “Brains … brains … my darling’s … *brains!”*

He tilted his ghoulish head, listening to Tina’s anguished sobs.

Then he heard something else. From afar …

A whistling sound.

Tina and Ernie heard it, too.

They listened keenly.

The eerie whistling sound got rapidly louder … overwhelmingly loud … drowning out all other earthly concerns.

It was the sound of doom.

And it was the last thing that any of them ever heard.

23

The defectors, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Raymond Aston, were gleefully preparing to drink a toast of Russian vodka at Aston's dacha outside Moscow. They stood by the huge fireplace in the darkly furnished study while Aston filled three large glasses.

That morning of 15 September, Raymond Aston had had a conversation with Gregori Zotov, the First Director of the KGB division to which all three defectors were assigned. Zotov had briefed Aston on events subsequent to the obliteration of the city of Louisville, Kentucky, by a half-kiloton tactical nuclear artillery shell.

The city no longer existed, except for remnants of melted, twisted rubble. Its occupants had been vaporized. Thousands of people on the periphery of the massive explosion, miles away from the mushrooming fireball, had been maimed, smashed, roasted, blinded, and poisoned by radiation. Morgues and hospitals outside the devastated area were overflowing with dead, sick and dying evacuees.

The American government had "explained" the incident by calling it an act of sabotage. According to an official news release, a hitherto unheard of leftist terrorist group calling itself the Green Brigade had wired the State Department to take credit for the disaster. They claimed to have detonated, in Louisville's warehouse and refinery district, a small nuclear device fashioned from stolen plutonium. The entire nation was in a state of panic and hysteria, not only because of the sudden, awful destruction of one of its key cities, but because no one could be sure where the terrorists might strike next with their home-made nuclear bombs.

When the three glasses were filled with vodka, the beamingly elated defectors raised them on high and clinked them together. Raymond Aston proposed his toast. "Here's to Operation Drummer Boy! May it plague our enemies forever!"

They guzzled, and tossed the empty glasses into the fireplace where they crashed and shattered. From a tray on his desk, Aston took clean glasses and started pouring another round. "Here's the best part," he said to the other two men. "The American military establishment has prevailed upon the Environmental Protection Agency to help them in the clean-up they so avidly desire. The EPA has ordered the removal of tons and tons of soil and debris from the contaminated area. At this moment, that stuff is residing in one hundred and seventy-five railroad cars, parked on an unused railway line in South Dakota."

“Hah!” Guy Burgess exclaimed, grinning with his wide, fishlike mouth. “That’s splendid! What in the world do they plan on *doing* with it?”

The frail, weak-chinned Maclean chortled insipidly. “Even if they’ve deluded themselves into thinking they can decontaminate all that soil and debris,” he pointed out, “they’ve still got an insurmountable problem. Because what about the water supply? What are they going to do about *that?”*

Aston’s pale blue eyes gleamed with humorous enjoyment of the predicament he had helped cause for his former countrymen. “They don’t know how they’re going to safely dispose of *any* of the contaminated stuff,” he said with a soft chuckle.

“Rich! *Very* rich!” Burgess bellowed, breaking into helpless laughter.

“You mean …?” asked the timid Maclean, as the ramifications dawned on him.

“Yes … exactly,” Aston said with smug, triumphant anticipation, “It’s bound to happen again. It’s only a matter of time, and the terror will be loosed upon our enemies once again.”

They drank to it, and tossed their empty glasses into the fireplace.

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